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Mario Number One!*

***But Can Nintendo's Biggest Star Become a Box Office Hero?**

By Ethan Shanfeld and Brent Lang

Illumination CEO Chris Meledandri and Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto

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Let's-a-Go! Mario Is Finally Ready to Conquer the Movies

CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton Ramin Setoodeh

As anyone who grew up on Nintendo can tell you, nothing — not even those treacherous turtle shells — could stop Super Mario. He wove through Bowser's labyrinthine castle in the original 1985 video game that launched a $30 billion gaming empire. He raced laps on Koopa Troopa Beach and the psychedelic Rainbow Road in the beloved Mario Kart 64. He even taught children how to master a keyboard without looking in the '90s educational game Mario Teaches Typing.

So it's a little surprising that Mario and his brother Luigi's first foray into movies was such a dud. The 1993 live-action "Super Mario Bros.," starring Bob Hoskins as Mario and John Leguizamo as his plunger-wielding partner in crime, barely made a dent in pop culture — short of being ridiculed for its silly script and having everyone involved disavow the final product.

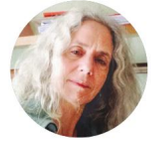
But now, some 30 years later, Hollywood is betting all the coins in Mushroom Kingdom that Mario will finally become a mega movie star. In this week's cover story, featuring Illumination CEO Chris Meledandri and Mario creator (and video game legend) Shigeru Miyamoto, Ethan Shanfeld and Brent Lang investigate what it took to relaunch Mario's acting career.

This time, an animated Mario is out to conquer multiplexes much like the Minions have. And "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" represents a major opportunity for Hollywood to exploit the $350 billion video game business. (By the way, that's bigger than the movie, music or television industries.) If "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" is a smash success, as analysts are predicting, studios could realize that comic books are so yesterday's news. The most valuable IP might just be hiding on a cartridge in the family game room.

Contributors

Executive editor **Brent Lang** was one of the unhappy few who saw the 1993 "Super Mario Bros." in theaters. Co-writing a cover about the much, much better 2023 version has helped him recover. Almost.

Associate online editor **Ethan Shanfeld** co-wrote this week's cover story on "The Super Mario Bros. Movie." While franchise creator Shigeru Miyamoto refused to reveal his go-to Mario Kart character, Ethan's is Toadette.



Senior editor **Trish Deitch** would like to curl up on the couch of "Camelot" director Bartlett Sher's tiny Lincoln Center office and read every book on his shelves.

"Typically, my portrait work involves using physical environments to create visually distinctive images," says **Adam Amengual**, who photographed our Super Mario cover subjects in L.A. on Feb. 15. "However, this recent assignment offered me the chance to collaborate with Illumination's stunning fantasy worlds. It was a really fun experience."

Littleton: Photograph by Dan Doperalski; Setoodeh: Photograph by Alexi Lubomirski

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BIZ+BUZZ

Randy Brooke/Getty Images

Don Lemon in the Hot Seat

The CNN anchor's sexist remarks about Nikki Haley point to a history of misogynistic and unprofessional conduct

By Tatiana Siegel

In 2008, Don Lemon was co-anchoring CNN's "Live From" weekday show with Kyra Phillips, a gig he landed not long after arriving at the network. For months, tensions between the pair kept mounting. On more than one occasion, a "Live From" producer and a newsroom supervisor had to pull Lemon off the air during a commercial break because of his provocative antics. It's a situation reminiscent of Lemon's most recent gaffe, when he declared that the 51-year-old Nikki Haley isn't a viable presidential candidate because she "isn't in her prime."

Even before the issue with Phillips, sources say Lemon disrespected colleagues Nancy Grace on air and Soledad O'Brien during an editorial meeting. But his antipathy toward Phillips was particularly concerning. While she was on assignment in Iraq — a high-profile gig that Lemon coveted — he vented his disappointment at being passed over to producers, tearing up pictures and notes on Phillips' desk in the news pod they shared, according to two knowledgeable sources. When she returned, the conflict escalated. One night while dining with members of the news team, she received the first of two text messages from an unknown number on her flip phone, one of which warned she had crossed a line and would pay for it. Unnerved, Phillips enlisted CNN's higher-ups to identify the sender. Remarkably, the texts were traced back to Lemon, according to those same sources. A human resources investigation was launched, and while the findings were never disclosed, Lemon was abruptly pulled from his co-anchor duties and moved to weekends.

Phillips declined comment. A spokesperson for CNN says, "In the past business day we were unable to corroborate this 15-year-old account."

In the wake of Lemon's Feb. 16 comments about Haley — deemed "unacceptable" and "sexist" by everyone from CNN chair Chris Licht to Haley herself — many colleagues privately called for his ouster. Despite the outcry, Lemon was back on his feet after riding the bench for two days, posting a Twitter mea culpa in which he said he was "committed to doing better" and ignoring the matter altogether during his Feb. 22 on-air return.

Still, the incident has spotlighted Lemon's troubling treatment of women and unprofessional behavior, going back decades. *Variety* spoke with more than a dozen former and current colleagues who painted a picture of a journalist who flouted rules and cozied up to power while displaying open hostility to many female co-workers. Each time, he avoided meaningful consequences.

> **Don has long had a habit of saying idiotic and inaccurate things, so it sounds pretty on brand for him." —Soledad O'Brien**

Those who worked with Lemon dating back to his arrival at CNN say he was a name-dropper who left hints that he socialized with important people, like a hand-written note from Stedman Graham that he taped to his computer. More disturbing was his misogynistic behavior, multiple sources say. Lemon called one of his female producers fat. He also mocked Grace on air by mimicking her, shocking colleagues. Grace declined comment, but a person close to her tells *Variety* that "she thinks he's an ass" and that he was always "rude."

If Lemon felt threatened by Grace, she wasn't the only one. He was upset that Soledad O'Brien landed the job of hosting CNN's "Black in America" docuseries, which launched in 2008. During an editorial call attended by roughly 30 staffers, he suggested O'Brien wasn't Black, according to two witnesses, who found the characterization wildly offensive. (O'Brien's mother is Afro-Cuban.)

O'Brien, who wasn't present, tells *Variety*, "Don has long had a habit of saying idiotic and inaccurate things, so it sounds pretty on brand for him."

A spokesperson for CNN says, "Don, Soledad and others have in the past correctly referred to her Afro-Cuban heritage as it is a unique part of her personal story. But Don denies making any related remark in a derogatory way."

In 2009, CNN was allowed to send one journalist into Staples Center to cover the Michael Jackson memorial. Lemon was the choice, while Anderson Cooper and O'Brien anchored outside. Sources remember Lemon posting on social media a snide remark about Cooper getting more airtime.

Instead of reining in Lemon, his superiors let his behavior slide, perhaps because he had fostered a close friendship with then-Turner Broadcasting System chairman and CEO Phil Kent, sitting in the Turner box alongside him at sporting events.

After Kent hired Jeff Zucker to run the network in 2013, Lemon became emboldened. One female colleague who had been close to the anchor says he grew out of touch with his friends. "I saw a new Don emerging, and I didn't like the new Don," she says. "He likes celebrity. He likes fame, likes power."

He also was polarizing. In 2014, he drew criticism for telling a Bill Cosby rape accuser on air that she could have stopped an attack by biting the comedian's penis.

After Zucker was ousted in 2022, many believed that Lemon would be on the chopping block. Yet, he survived. He was moved back to mornings in November and paired with female anchors — Poppy Harlow and Kaitlan Collins — for the first time since the Phillips debacle. The gaffes continued. One month into the new role, he drew ire for saying the U.S. men's national soccer team should get paid more than the women's team because it's "more interesting to watch."

Three months later came the Haley comments, which sources say prompted Harlow to run to the bathroom to cry, with Collins following her to calm her down. Insiders say they weren't shocked by the latest controversy.

"I'm never surprised when Don gets in trouble," says Goldie Taylor, a journalist and writer who appeared frequently on Lemon's weekend show. "Now, it seems to me that when he says something offensive, there's almost always a woman on the other side."

But so far, Lemon remains seated in his anchor chair.

Colleagues of Lemon — here with "CNN This Morning" co-anchors Poppy Harlow and Kaitlan Collins — recount his open hostility to female co-workers.

Remembered 1942-2023
Seymour Stein

The Talking Heads drummer pays tribute to the inimitable Sire Records co-founder

By Chris Frantz

Sire Records co-founder Seymour Stein was indisputably one of the greatest music executives of all time, with a career that spanned six decades and a rare ear for talent that led Madonna, Talking Heads, Lou Reed, Ice-T, Depeche Mode, the Pretenders, the Smiths and many others to his label. Stein, who died on April 2 at the age of 80, is remembered here by Chris Frantz, drummer of Talking Heads, who, with his wife, Tina Weymouth, Jerry Harrison and David Byrne, signed with the label in 1976.

Seymour Stein in 2015

Seymour told this story many times. His first visit to CBGB on the Bowery was to see the Ramones. His wife, Linda, insisted that he see them because they were something new and fabulous and she thought he should sign them, which he did. He was standing outside the club on the sidewalk speaking with [Patti Smith's longtime guitarist] Lenny Kaye, waiting for the Ramones to go on, when he heard the support band begin to play. *"When my love stands next to your love ..."*

To hear Seymour tell it, the music attracted him like a snake charmer and he felt a surge of excitement, hurried inside and rushed down the length of the club to stand in front of the stage. As he watched the young trio play their half-hour set, he fell in love. He offered to help Tina take her gear off the stage and told us we *had* to be on his label. We explained to Seymour that we didn't feel ready to make a record yet. He was disappointed, but we said we would keep in touch. A year and a half later, we made a deal with him.

Seymour was a good match for us. He understood us and accepted our eccentricities. He liked that we were smart and knew about art. Not very many record company guys understood or even cared about Talking Heads at that time, but Seymour believed in us from the beginning, and his support never wavered.

Seymour was not only a great record man, he was a true musicologist. It seemed he remembered every song ever recorded, and he would sing them out loud. His voice was something else: You haven't lived until you've heard Seymour sing one of your own songs to you.

There was some serious resistance on the part of American radio to play "punk" music. Program directors would say, "Oh, we don't play punk music. We only play *good music*," and because we came out of CBGB and had a song called "Psycho Killer," they assumed we were punk. Inspired by French Nouvelle Vague cinema, Seymour coined the term "New Wave." He said, "Talking Heads are not punk. Talking Heads are New Wave," and the radio guys would say, "Oh, really? Well, I guess we could play New Wave." Before you knew it, our version of Al Green's "Take Me to the River" was suddenly getting AM and FM airplay.

One of my favorite times with Seymour was when he, Linda and his right-hand man Ken Kushnick came to our wedding in Old Washington, Ky. Our first album was not even out yet, but the buzz was good. All of us were feeling good about the way things were going. Seymour came to the wedding in a white suit, white shirt, white tie and white shoes. He was a real dandy that day, and Linda, also dressed in white, was lovely too. At the reception, because we were in Kentucky and he'd had a few mint juleps, Seymour was inspired to sing us his repertoire of country songs.

We had so much fun together back then, and though we hadn't seen each other very often of late, we remember the many good times we had with Seymour in New York, London, Paris and Hamburg. We also remember how much he lived and loved the music. He was our champion from the beginning to the end, and for that, Seymour, we thank you.

With wife Linda Stein at Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth's wedding in 1977

Stein: Chance Yeh/FilmMagic/Getty Images; Linda/Seymour: Courtesy Chris Frantz

Vengeance Is Theirs

The road to redemption is paved with rage in Netflix and A24 dramedy 'Beef'

By Rachel Seo

Steven Yeun and Ali Wong star in "Beef."

"What the fuck is happening?"

That was Steven Yeun's reaction while shooting the cataclysmic climax of "Beef," which he leads with Ali Wong. The Netflix and A24 dramedy opens plausibly enough with a road-rage scene between Wong's Amy, an entrepreneur whose easygoing nature masks secret desires, and Yeun's Danny, a contractor who goes to extremes to obtain what he wants. But that initial conflict drives both to exact bizarre acts of revenge on each other, revealing the darkest corners of their psyches. The result? Chaos. In one scene, Amy masturbates with a gun; in another, Danny urinates all over her bathroom — and that's just the beginning. Seeded throughout are quiet explorations of the characters' anger, loneliness and fear.

"Both assume incorrectly that they cannot show their true selves to anyone in their lives," says Lee Sung Jin, the creator and showrunner of "Beef," which premieres on April 6. "Part of the reason they're drawn to each other is they can feel this other person is as broken and messy as they are."

The show marks another live-action TV role for Yeun, who broke out with his turn as Glenn Rhee in "The Walking Dead" and made history when he became the first Asian American Oscar nominee for lead actor with 2020's "Minari." Wong, a notable stand-up comedian who's starred in films such as "Always Be My Maybe," tackles her first major dramatic role in "Beef," which features a predominantly Asian cast that includes Young Mazino, Joseph Lee, David Choe and Patti Yasutake. But Lee, who wrote for Netflix animated sitcom "Tuca & Bertie" and will pen Marvel's upcoming "Thunderbolts," says that while the "characters happen to be Asian American, there's so much more to them than just that."

He originally conceived the leads as an Asian man and a "Stanley Tucci type," before replacing that character with Amy. "I abandoned the Stanley Tucci type very quickly because especially in the modern era, you have to talk about race, and there's so many other shows that do that very well," Lee says. "I didn't have much interest, nor the capabilities, to write about that." If Wong were another race, he notes, he still would have wanted to work with her, but the fact that she is Asian American helps "because it allows for so many other doors to open, and for us to explore other themes" without having to "address the card of race, which would take up a sizable amount of narrative real estate."

A clue to the series' thematic North Star lies in the final episode's title, "Figures of Light." "'One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious,'" Lee says, quoting Carl Jung by heart. "That is ultimately what this show is about."

As for Yeun and Wong, the two voiced characters together on "Tuca & Bertie," but "Beef" marks their first in-person collaboration. Wong jokes that she was nervous about the prospect: "I didn't know what kind of actor Steven was. I didn't know if he was going to throw a doughnut at my head." (He didn't.) "He's loving and sweet between takes."

Serendipitously, their real-life friendship provided the chemistry that twists into their characters' antagonism, which ascends to full-blown catastrophe in the penultimate episode. The filming, Yeun recalls, sparked a sense of spontaneous combustion. "There was this ramp-up that happens in the reality that you as [an actor] are also becoming aware of," he says, "that just escalates to a point where you're like, 'I didn't foresee this.'"

"It was just this explosion," he adds. "Like, 'This is crazy! Shit!'"

Andrew Cooper/Netflix (2)

Method or Madness?

Jeremy Strong and Brian Cox are just the latest in a long line of performers clashing over the delicate art of acting

By Brent Lang

"Method acting" long ago lost its meaning.

Instead, it's become a catchall to describe an intense commitment to getting it right on stage or screen. It's an all-out approach that sees performers pack and shed pounds, feast on live cockroaches or raw bison, extract teeth or eschew showers, and remain in character between takes. Those are just a few examples of the extremes to which Robert De Niro, Nicolas Cage, Leonardo DiCaprio, Shia LaBeouf, Charlize Theron, Daniel Day-Lewis and their ilk push themselves in the service of their art. For their suffering, they receive Oscars and Emmys, along with a ton of media coverage — just look at the scores of pieces documenting the gonzo things Jared Leto has done each time one of his movies get released.

The payoff can be electrifying performances that blur the lines between character and actor. But it's an approach that can be deeply annoying to the people around its practitioners, particularly actors schooled in less all-consuming methods of deploying their craft. The latest thespian dust-up went down on the set of "Succession," where Jeremy Strong's Day-Lewis-ian effort to fully capture the spirit of the troubled corporate scion he plays on the show involved isolating himself from his fellow performers, showing up to work tipsy, and in one scene, jumping off a stage with such abandon that he fractured his foot.

Strong's shenanigans didn't sit well with his co-star Brian Cox, a veteran actor who honed his instrument playing eight shows a week for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Cox labeled Strong's style "fucking annoying" in one interview and later vented his displeasure to *Variety*: "I'm sorry. All that sort of 'I think, therefore I feel.' Just do the job. Don't identify."

Cox isn't alone. Anthony Hopkins decried Method acting as "a pain in the ass," Mads Mikkelsen called it "bullshit," and Toni Collette dismissed it as "utter wankery." In an oft-repeated anecdote, Laurence Olivier was so exasperated by Dustin Hoffman's decision to stay up all night to look exhausted for a scene in "Marathon Man" that he tartly asked, "My dear boy, why don't you just try acting?" Yet what's curious is that many performers linked with Method acting don't identify as Method actors. Strong, for instance, says he practices "identity diffusion."

So what is The Method? Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski developed the approach in the early 20th century, creating a "system" that encouraged actors to do things such as draw on their memories when playing roles. However, "The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act," Isaac Butler's definitive history, argues that Stanislavski's practices weren't just passed down like commandments. They were fiercely debated and reinterpreted by subsequent teachers, such as Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg, who pushed their students, often in radically divergent ways, to collapse the boundaries between their own lives and those of the characters they inhabited. That ushered in generations of galvanic screen actors, from Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift to Hoffman and De Niro. These were artists intent on pushing themselves to the limit. They needed every tool at their disposal. But maybe there's more to it than perfectionism.

"Acting is such a tenuous thing," Brando once confessed in an interview for The New Yorker, going on to describe it as "a fragile, shy thing." And it's easy to see what he meant, because it is such an ephemeral art form. Success or failure depends on the vagaries of taste, scoring a few good breaks while steering clear of the bad ones, and riding a wave that threatens to crash in a cacophony of bruising reviews or box office bombs. Given that uncertainty, it makes sense that actors would want to find some way to exert control. Even if they drive everyone around them crazy.

Brian Cox and Jeremy Strong in "Succession"

Graeme Hunter/HBO

It's Gotta Be the Shoes

'Air' taps into — and updates — our collective memories of the '80s

By Todd Gilchrist

Michael Jordan and his signature sneakers have been a fixture of pop culture since 1984, when Sonny Vaccaro convinced the then-rookie (and more importantly, his shrewd mother, Deloris) to sign an industry-changing endorsement deal with sportswear brand Nike. "Air" dramatizes many of the finer points of these real-life events, with Matt Damon playing Vaccaro, Viola Davis as Deloris Jordan and Ben Affleck pulling double duty as director and co-star. But the new film operates less as a tribute to consumerism than as an origin story of one exceptional athlete — and the leather-and-rubber vessel that has become synonymous with his legacy.

"I wasn't all that interested in the business minutiae in the story," Affleck tells *Variety*. "It's really a fable, inspired by these characters and who they represent."

"Air" screenwriter Alex Convery grew up in the suburbs of Illinois in the 1990s during Jordan's historic double NBA three-peat. He says he was inspired to write the script while watching "The Last Dance," ESPN Films' 2020 documentary about Jordan's final season with the Chicago Bulls. "'The Last Dance' showed us how still ever present he is and in pop culture," Convery says.

"It's just so second nature now — Jordans and Nike and the NBA as arguably the second-most-popular sport in the country," he says. "It wasn't always that way."

Tapping into moviegoers' collective memories of the 1980s, production designer François Audouy flooded the sets with instantly recognizable ephemera, from a Trivial Pursuit board game to Apple's original personal computer, the Macintosh 128K. Aiming for a look that was evocative yet faithful to the period, Audouy says his research unearthed a more subdued landscape than the neon-soaked movies and television series of the era depicted. "I was struck by how banal and unsexy the Nike offices were before Michael Jordan," Audouy says.

"I didn't want to make fun of it. It's just that they didn't know what they didn't know," he says. "So it was a very delicate balance between historical re-creation and then our own invention of an environment that felt like a grounded commentary on 1980s corporate culture in Beaverton, Oregon."

Ben Affleck directed "Air" and stars as Phil Knight.

The office of Sonny Vaccaro (Matt Damon) at Nike's headquarters

Given that the narrative not only precedes the debut of Jordan and his apparel line but the sea change in athleisure that its explosive sales triggered, costume designer Charlese Antoinette Jones dressed the Nike staffers in clothes that were counterintuitive to the cultural shorthand of the decade. "It was a lot simpler — more focused on running and utility and not necessarily being super cool," Jones says. "I wanted them to feel behind the times, and the people that work there were not as slick as some of the other characters at Converse and Adidas."

At that point Nike was an industry leader only in sales of running shoes — which were seldom worn for fashion — so Jones' focus on detailing the company's forgettable style only amplifies the aesthetic impact of that first red, white and black basketball shoe bearing Jordan's name. "Even though we're retelling the story, it really felt like I'm a part of the design process of the first Jordan," says Jones.

"Air" chronicles a cultural moment that's transformative for multiple generations of basketball fans and sneakerheads. Says Affleck, "We were trying to get right what it feels like to be around somebody like a Michael Jordan, who comes into the world and kind of astonishes and dazzles people with his potential — and the effect that has on people."

But even if you aren't, like this writer, a serial wearer of Nike sneakers and a second-generation University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill alum who followed Jordan's meteoric exploits from an early age, Affleck's film captures the sensation of identifying something that's not simply enduring, or special, but truly singular — and always wanting to carry that with you, even if only underfoot.

Ana Carballosa/Amazon Content Services (2)

OUR TOWN

JUST FOR VARIETY

by Marc Malkin

Melanie Lynskey (1) wants to return to "The Last of Us." Only problem is — as fans of the HBO series know — her resistance group leader character Kathleen was killed off at the end of the first season. "If they wanted to go back and do an origin story, I would be there for it," Lynskey tells me. "The story of how this woman got into this crazy position would be really interesting."

Lynskey knew nothing about the Last of Us video game before she was approached about the project. "I've never played a video game," she says. "My thumbs don't work that way." She jokes that husband **Jason Ritter** convinced her to take the part: "He said, 'You have to do it, no questions asked.' I was like, 'But I'm tired.' He was like, 'I don't care.'"

• • •

With so many Marvel properties getting series adaptations on Disney+, when will "Black Panther"-inspired shows get green lights? "We've certainly talked about characters and ideas that could be Disney+ series," "Black Panther" producer **Nate Moore** (2) tells me. "But it really is about the right story and making sure we're not taking away from the cinematic experience of the franchise. ... I think our first love and **Kevin Feige**'s first love is the cinematic experience. The movie will always take precedence, but we have had ideas of what could be a Disney series."

• • •

Brooke Shields (3) came close to starring in the 1988 drama "Dangerous Liaisons" alongside **John Malkovich**, **Glenn Close** and **Michelle Pfeiffer**. "They told me it came down to me and someone else," Shields tells me. "They said the other person was this girl not many people knew about. It was **Uma Thurman**. At that time and that age, it felt so personal, but I've learned over time not to take it personally because 'No' outweighs 'Yes' extensively in this business." "Pretty Baby," a docuseries about Shields' life, premiered on Hulu on April 3. Could a scripted biopic be next? "I'm not sure it's necessary. That feels a little too self-indulgent," Shields says. "I feel like the documentary is closing a chapter. I think it's the healthiest and the most honorable way to tell the story."

• • •

Dove Cameron (4) is speaking out about anti-LGBTQ laws in state legislatures. "So much of it is so violent and so hateful and so irrational," the "Boyfriend" singer and "Schmigadoon!" star, who identifies as queer, says on this week's "Just for Variety" podcast. "I would love to say I feel incredibly hopeful, and everything's gonna be fine, but I think that it's a very, very scary time right now." However, Cameron insists, the hate is "not more powerful" than the LGBTQ community. "It's just louder sometimes."

• • •

Eugenio Derbez (5) is revealing more about the virtual reality game accident that left his shoulder shattered in 17 pieces in August. The "CODA" actor tells me his son **Vadhir** convinced him to try out their gaming system. "He was the one who was like, 'Let's play VR,'" Eugenio says. "I was like, 'No, let's just watch TV.'" Leave it to the Derbezes to have a laugh about it now. Vadhir cracks, "Even when he was on the floor and was like, 'Let's go to the hospital,' I was like, 'No, chill. I know you're hurting but it's going to be OK.'"

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

Lynskey: Dominik Bindl/Getty Images; Moore : Kevin Winter/WireImage; Shields: Lionel Hahn/Getty Images; Camero: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images; Derbez: Emma McIntyre/Getty Images

EXPOSURE

Edited by Marc Malkin

GIDDY UP: **Megan Thee Stallion** and **Shania Twain** get close at the CMT Music Awards at the Moody Center in Austin on April 2.

Christopher Polk for Variety

March 30

'Beef' Premiere

Tudum Theater, Los Angeles

Ali Wong, star and executive producer of the Netflix series, opened up about her friendship with co-star **Steven Yeun**, calling her experience working with him "a dream come true." She also revealed the toughest thing she had to give up to shoot the dark comedy. "The most challenging part for me was stepping away from stand-up. It's by far the longest break I had taken. It's such a big part of me," Wong told *Variety*. "Artistically, it was good for me to take a break, so I'm very excited to get back on the road."

Steven Yeun and Ali Wong

David Choe

Patti Yasutake

Remy Holt and Netflix's Ted Sarandos

March 30

GLAAD Media Awards

Beverly Hilton, Beverly Hills

Bad Bunny received the Vanguard Award from fellow music superstar **Ricky Martin**. "I believe that when you have a good heart and you give love, that's what you receive back, and that's what I've wanted to do all this time with my music, with what I represent, with my space, with my concerts, with my shows, with all I do," Bunny said. "That's all I want to do. Give and receive love." **Jeremy Pope**, the Stephen F. Kolzak Award honoree, said, "It's rooms like this that remind me of the power of this community. How we will rise time and time again for each other. ... I refuse to use my time on this earth scared or living in shame. And I ask you to do the same."

Margaret Cho

Jennifer Coolidge

Bad Bunny and Ricky Martin

Jeremy Pope

Zaya Wade and Gabrielle Union

Beef: Michael Buckner for Variety (4); Bunny/Martin: Jerod Harris/Getty Images; Coolidge, Cho, Wade/Union, Pope: Mark Von Holden for Variety (4)

EXPOSURE

Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck

March 27

'Air' Premiere

Regency Village Theatre, Westwood

The Amazon Studios film chronicles the launch of Nike and **Michael Jordan**'s Air Jordan shoe line. **Ben Affleck** not only directed the movie but also stars as Nike founder and CEO **Phil Knight**. **Marlon Wayans**, who plays college basketball coach **George Raveling**, joked that he was "intimidated" by Affleck because of his superhero physique. "I really was on top of my stuff," he told *Variety*. "I was like, 'I don't want my ass beat by Batman.'" **Matt Damon**, who plays Nike exec **Sonny Vaccaro**, revealed to *Variety* that Affleck was recently pitched a sequel to "Good Will Hunting." Affleck laughed, "It's not a sequel we're going to pursue."

Chris Tucker

Garcelle Beauvais and Viola Davis

Jimmy Kimmel and Matt Damon

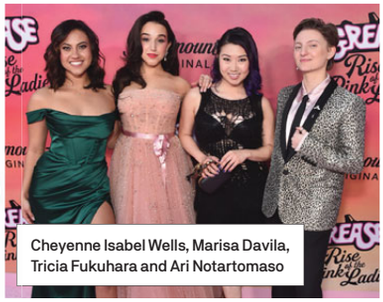
March 29

'Grease: Rise of the Pink Ladies' Premiere

Hollywood American Legion Post 43, Hollywood

Justin Tranter

Grammy-nominated songwriter **Justin Tranter**, who has collaborated with **Lady Gaga**, **Selena Gomez** and **Miley Cyrus**, wrote and produced 30 original songs for the new Paramount+ "Grease" prequel series. "Even though I was in a rock band and now I make pop music, musicals are why I started making music in the first place," Tranter told *Variety*. Showrunner **Annabel Oakes** said the diverse casting is a more accurate depiction of high school life in Southern California in the 1950s than was shown in the original 1978 film: "I got old yearbooks from the school where 'Grease' was shot. I found a yearbook from 1954. It was a very diverse school. It was integrated. There were a lot of Japanese American kids, a lot of Latinx kids. There were Black kids and there were white kids. I wanted to tell the story that we haven't seen about the 1950s."



Cheyenne Isabel Wells, Marisa Davila, Tricia Fukuhara and Ari Notartomaso

March 28

'Murder Mystery 2' Premiere

Regency Village Theatre, Westwood

Jennifer Aniston and Adam Sandler

Jennifer Aniston and **Adam Sandler** reunited for the second installment of Netflix's action comedy. The stunt work took its toll on both stars. "My goddamn hip, I had to change that at the end of the movie," Sandler told *Variety* about undergoing hip replacement surgery. "Everything's scary at 56 years old. You never know what the hell you're gonna get up from. I'm sluggy, man. My body hurts." Aniston revealed an old back problem flared up during her last day of shooting: "It was one of those things where you wake up the next day or two days later, and you're like, 'Wow, that got bad.'"

Jodie Turner-Smith

Air: Gilbert Flores for Variety (4); Grease: rise of the Pink Ladies: PMC (2); Murder Mystery 2: Michael Buckner for Variety

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Plus Interviews with Top Contenders.

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MA
PA

Why Hollywood is betting big on Nintendo's **MARIO** and **LUIGI, PRINCESS PEACH,**

RIO

RT

TOAD and **BOWSER** to power up in a new animated movie ■ By ETHAN SHANFELD AND BRENT LANG

The most famous video game designer in the world

is sitting meditatively in a drab studio in Burbank. The austerity of the room is in stark juxtaposition with all the colorful characters he's dreamed up over a lifetime, from mushroom-gobbling plumbers to mystical warriors to barrel-hurling gorillas. He's the brains behind two of the biggest video game franchises of all time: Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda. In fact, this visionary's influence is so vast, he's been compared to Walt Disney or Steve Jobs.

P. 24

And as Shigeru Miyamoto picks disinterestedly at a breakfast burrito, he's an island of calm in a swirl of chaos. His team of handlers — Nintendo executives from Japan and America — is frantically hovering around him like a protective ring of Koopa shells. Miyamoto, who has granted only a handful of major interviews, is here to discuss "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" with Chris Meledandri, CEO of Illumination. Both served as producers of the animated feature from Universal and Nintendo.

"We've never seen this level of intensity from the audience in anticipation of a movie," says Meledandri, whose "Despicable Me" series is the highest-grossing animated franchise in history. The numbers back him up: 750 million people worldwide viewed the "Mario" trailers.

Out April 5, the film stars Chris Pratt as the mustachioed plumber and marks Mario's return to Hollywood, 30 years after the franchise's live-action film adaptation bombed at the box office. (In an interview with *Variety*, the directors of that movie call it a "suffering fest" that left a "stain" on their careers — more on that later.)

But before Miyamoto can discuss all that, his harried translator insists the questions he'll be asked in a lighthearted video interview are impossible to answer. Miyamoto cannot talk about Nintendo's combat series Super Smash Bros., his translator says, because he doesn't play the games much. Nor would he dare weigh in on the most misunderstood Mario title or reveal his favorite franchise villain.

While Miyamoto's refusal to answer fun questions is frustrating, it becomes apparent that, for him, these questions aren't "fun" at all. Prodding Miyamoto, who calls himself "Mario's mom," to name his go-to Super Mario character is more fraught than asking him to pick a favorite child — it's practically a Sophie's Choice. If, for example, he names Bowser over Toad, he might alienate millions of fans around the world.

It's not that Miyamoto is difficult — quite the opposite. Once he and Meledandri sit down for a more formal conversation, Miyamoto gamely gets into the nitty-gritty. Dressed in a red Mario T-shirt underneath a black blazer, the slim 70-year-old is nearly as animated as his characters. While he's been described as "Nintendo's mascot," Miyamoto is humble, using "we" rather than "I" to avoid taking sole credit for developing a series that has sold more than 413 million copies and grossed more than $30 billion. When discussing

(Previous spread) Nintendo/Illumination Entertainment/Universal Pictures (9)

his creative process, he interrupts himself with puckish laughter and flashes a disarming smile.

"The Super Mario Bros. Movie" marks a critical moment for Hollywood and its attempts to establish a larger foothold in the gaming world. The attraction is obvious. Video games generate $350 billion annually, dwarfing the revenues of the film, television and music industries.

It's also an important step for Nintendo, which has been skittish about translating its video games to film ever since Bob Hoskins and John Leguizamo picked up a pair of plungers in 1993's "Super Mario Bros." That film flopped spectacularly, landing on various "Worst Movies of All Time" lists. Its production was marred by drunken actors (Leguizamo later admitted to downing whiskey with Hoskins between takes), last-minute rewrites and explosive fights between the producers and the directors, married couple Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel.

In hindsight, it's clear what went wrong. Morton recalls briefly meeting with Miyamoto before production began on "Super Mario Bros.," but Nintendo had zero involvement in the movie, something that Morton regrets.

"If I'd have had a relationship with Miyamoto and brought him onboard, if he had been a producer and he understood what we were doing, he wouldn't have let certain things happen," Morton says. "We would have been a team, and it would have been a different film."

Produced by a Disney subsidiary, the movie was viewed as a licensing experiment by Nintendo, which yielded creative control to the film's backers. The fiasco spooked Miyamoto and kept Mario off the big screen for 30 years.

"We were fearful of all the failure of past IP adaptations, where there's a license and a distance between the original creators and the creators of the films," Miyamoto says, without specifically referencing the '93 movie. "The fans get outraged and mad because the studios didn't do justice to the original work. We really didn't want a backlash."

It wasn't just a Mario problem. Ever since the original "Super Mario Bros." movie, video game adaptations have largely face-planted while trying to make the leap from console to cinema. Yes, 2001's "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider" starring Angelina Jolie was a massive hit, but that's been the exception to the rule. Does anyone remember "Assassin's Creed," "Warcraft" or "Double Dragon"? Not even a shirtless Jake Gyllenhaal with abs of steel could save "Prince of Persia."

"Movies are a different medium," says Donna Langley, chairman of Universal Pictures. "It can't just be about super-serving core fans. These adaptations must tell a good story that resonates with general audiences."

In the past few years, more projects stuck the landing — from HBO's zeitgeisty "The Last of Us" to the flourishing "Sonic" movie franchise to the Tom Holland hit "Uncharted." Increasingly, studios are looking to video games as a vital source of IP: It can't just be superhero movies, after all.

Nintendo's trepidation about joining in the fun explains why the idea for a Super Mario Bros. animated feature floated around Hollywood for decades. In 2014, leaked emails revealed Sony had spent years negotiating to acquire the film rights, with the animation studio's then-president of production eager to "build a Mario empire." That deal never materialized, which helped Meledandri land the property and give Mario a 1-Up.

M

Meledandri first got to know Mario in the early '90s, when he bought a Super Nintendo for his office at 20th Century Fox and watched his young son "light up" while playing Super Mario World, still considered by purists to be one of the greatest of the plumber's many adventures. Since the game's 1991 release, millions of players have become just as

Donkey Kong (voiced by Seth Rogen)

Nintendo/Illumination Entertainment/Universal Pictures

Goomba

Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto and Illumination CEO Chris Meledandri

attached to Yoshi, Mario's dino sidekick, as to their own childhood pets.

"The impact of Mario in my life was watching my son's joy," Meledandri says. "When you see your child light up, you are immediately pulled toward whatever it is that's lighting them up."

It's no surprise that Miyamoto found a creative partner in Meledandri. Throughout his time at Fox and Illumination, which he founded in 2007, he garnered a reputation for developing highly profitable family films and steering successful adaptations of beloved properties, such as "The Grinch." But it wasn't Meledandri's highlight reel (or the Minions) that earned Miyamoto's trust. What marked a turning point was Meledandri's openness about his most embarrassing failure — the 2000 film "Titan A.E.," directed by Don Bluth and Gary Goldman, which he supervised while at Fox, losing the company $100 million. Meledandri argues this disaster gave him the courage to leave Fox to start Illumination.

"My ability to do that was tied to the fact that I had already confronted my fears," he says. "When I did fall on my face it was very freeing. I wouldn't have had the courage to do my own thing had I not confronted that failure."

While the 63-year-old Meledandri is shy and soft-spoken, Miyamoto is warm and playful, a designer who, with 1981's Donkey Kong, single-handedly wrested the video game industry out of the hands of programmers and engineers and into those of artists. His vision helped grow Nintendo into a $50 billion company, yet Miyamoto can't be bothered to talk numbers.

Don't let Meledandri, outfitted in jeans and a navy blue quarter-zip, fool you. Even though he's not one to play up his competitive nature, friends say Meledandri works around the clock, coordinating between Illumination's main hubs in Los Angeles and Paris. And what he's accomplished defies the prevailing odds. At a time when animated studios such as Disney and Pixar have stumbled at the box office, releasing duds like "Strange World" and "Lightyear," Illumination remains on top — with last summer's "Minions: The Rise of Gru" grossing nearly $1 billion, a pandemic-era high for the genre. The studio has found the right formula for mixing subversive jokes aimed at older audiences with cuddly creatures that appeal to younger moviegoers. "I'm probably the least funny guy who has produced so many funny movies," Meledandri admits.

Aaron Horvath, who directed "Mario" with Michael Jelenic, says Meledandri is "similar" to Miyamoto "in that they both tell stories in very experiential ways."

For Miyamoto, the film had to mirror the agony and ecstasy of playing a video game. "The reason we were so resistant and careful to adapt our games into movies is because in video games there is always a player, who overcomes challenges and fights their way through," Miyamoto says. "Their struggle — redoing the levels over and over — is all part of it."

It's a realization that may point to why so many other game adaptations fail: "Just following the plot points of the video games will never work as a movie," Miyamoto explains. "Without the involvement of the player, it won't meet expectations."

When Mario first enters the Mushroom Kingdom in the movie, he gapes at its alien creatures and floating islands, marveling, "What is this place?" In fact, his introduction to this magical land is probably reminiscent of yours, when you first hit "Start" on a Super Mario game.

Photographs by Adam Amengual

Background by Illumination and Illumination Studios Paris

After all, Miyamoto says, "we recognized that each fan of the video game has a Mario in themself, as he is the avatar that represents the player."

With that in mind, "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" sets out to re-create the most visceral aspects of the player experience: the addictive frustration of respawning after a platforming blunder; the Mario Kart customization process before a grand prix; the sweaty-palmed exhilaration of perfectly honing a Bullet Bill. And there's also an unabashed spirit of fun that the makers of the film were eager to bring to the story.

"We wanted to treat this movie like 'Star Wars' or 'Indiana Jones,' or even the Brendan Fraser 'Mummy,'" Jelenic says. "That's what this film is: an adventure movie."

Koopa Paratroopa

Perhaps the most important aspect of Movie Mario is his voice, which lit the internet on fire when audiences unfavorably compared Pratt's toned-down take in the first trailer with the over-the-top Italian intonation they know and love.

"To develop the voice, I sampled various Italian and New York accents," Pratt tells *Variety* in a lengthy email. "As the directors and I developed the character, we came to land on a voice that is different than Charles Martinet's version of Mario, but also different from my own voice."

While Pratt was "surprised" by the social media snark, he adds, "My hope is that people will come into the movie with an open mind and that once they see the film, any criticism around Mario's accent will disappear."

Pratt grew up in Lake Stevens, Wash., where the strip malls on the side of the highway were his hub world. At 9, he'd hop from his family duplex to Fowlds Dry Cleaners, a coin-operated laundry that had the Super Mario Bros. arcade game. "I would walk to Alfy's Pizza and stick my scrawny arm behind the jukebox to see if any coins had fallen out of the coin return," he says. "If, by chance, they had, I would scoop them up and go straight to the laundromat to play Super Mario Bros."

"This was a daily routine for me," Pratt adds, admitting that once or twice he'd fish for quarters in the wishing well near the Mexican restaurant in Frontier Village. "I cannot count the number of hours I devoted to rescuing Princess Peach and fighting Bowser."

Now, Pratt leads a Mario mission fit for the big screen, with a voice cast including Anya Taylor-Joy as Peach, Jack Black as Bowser, Charlie Day as Luigi and Seth Rogen as Donkey Kong. When casting, Meledandri's team pulled audio clips from a range of actors and listened to their voices while staring at character drawings. Once Illumination narrowed each role down to four to five voice actors, they presented options to Miyamoto.

For Day, voicing Luigi meant having an opportunity to put his own imprint on the character that he most frequently played as a childhood fan of the games. "My older sister would always go first, and she would inevitably get to be Mario," he remembers. "So, because of that, Luigi kind of became my favorite." But finding Luigi's patois involved some trial and error. "They kept giving me one note: 'This is "Super Mario," not "Goodfellas."' But it's always a process," he says. "And when you do these kinds of voice roles, you need to approach them with a child-like sense of 'Let's try anything.'"

(Paratroop) Nintendo/Illumination Entertainment/Universal Pictures

Meledandri and Miyamoto's association dates back nearly a decade. After meeting in 2014, when each executive independently worked on building attractions at Universal Studios based on "Despicable Me" and Super Mario Bros., Miyamoto and Meledandri began visiting each other in Kyoto and Los Angeles. Their talks dwelled less on what went wrong with the 1993 "Mario" movie and more on how they could translate the vibrant spirit of the games to the screen. "If we talked about that earlier "Mario" film for five minutes in the last eight years, that's an overstatement," Meledandri insists. "What we were interested in building was a partnership that stood in stark contrast to what that process was in the early '90s. Or in fact, in contrast to any other partnership between a Japanese creator and an American studio."

They started off teaching each other about the differences between making a movie versus creating a game.

"In video games, character serves the gameplay," Meledandri says. "In movies, character is everything. Our story is in service of character."

After the pair discussed a variety of potential collaborations between Nintendo and Illumination, they landed on Mario because the character's vague backstory left "room to create dimension that wasn't there." But making the first animated "Mario" movie forced Miyamoto to answer a question he had dodged for more than 40 years: Who *is* Mario?

The character — who debuted as Jumpman in Miyamoto's Donkey Kong, is a blank slate by design. "Mario is essentially a character created for Nintendo to develop more interesting, innovative games in the future," Miyamoto explains. "We were hesitant to create a backstory because we want Mario to be without restrictions. To establish a background for him might become a disadvantage for future games."

Based on his limited biography, we know Mario is a plumber who wears an oversize red cap, blue overalls and a bushy brown mustache. He has a brother, Luigi (the green one), and he's prone to blurting out enthusiastic catchphrases, delivered in a thick Italian accent, like, "Here we go!," "It's-a me!" and "Mamma mia!" Aside from that, he's a cipher. When asked what type of person Mario is, Miyamoto recalls a conversation he had in the mid-1980s with Japanese animator Yōichi Kotabe, who refined Miyamoto's pixel art of Mario into full-fledged character designs.

"When Kotabe asked, 'Who is this character?,' I told him, 'Mario is a person who will never hurt any other people,'" Miyamoto says. "That really struck him."

The version of Mario in "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" is more fleshed out. Here, he's a blue-collar New Yorker living at home with the fearful Luigi and their sprawling Italian American family. After the brothers launch a plumbing business, they set out to save Brooklyn from a flood and get sucked into a fantastical universe filled with armies of Toads, Koopas and kart-crafting Kongs.

But to Miyamoto, assigning a personality and backstory to his most famous creation was less important than replicating on-screen the *feeling* of playing the games.

"Rather than overthinking who Mario is, it was more important to visualize what we see in the video games as authentically as possible on the big screen," Miyamoto says.

That process started with preliminary 2D models of Mario before Illumination's animation teams passed three-dimensional designs back and forth between L.A. and Paris. Every step of the way, Nintendo artists fine-tuned the visuals with "draw-overs." In some cases, that required Miyamoto to step in himself.

In one meeting, with Horvath and Jelenic in France and Nintendo in Japan, Miyamoto was staring at a drawing of Bowser, fixated on his snout. Miyamoto took a screenshot with his iPad and, as the meeting dragged on, started sketching on top of the illustration. Eventually, he interrupted — "Hey, check this out," Horvath remembers him saying — and held his tablet up to the screen.

"He'd done this drawing over our drawing and explained how we hadn't gotten Bowser's muzzle area exactly right — that it's actually based on a tiger, with the nose and upper lip shapes," Horvath recalls. "It was kind of a revelatory moment."

As lifelong fans of the games, the team behind "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" obsessed over nailing the textures of the Mushroom Kingdom. "The amount of conversation about Mario's boots," Meledandri says with an exaggerated sigh, "the texture of his hat, the slight adjustments of facial features, how we handled his hair ..." He trails off. "Then we get into movement."

It was vital to Miyamoto that Illumination capture the minutiae of Mario's motions: how he runs, how he jumps, how an extended fist — no, not his head — breaks brick blocks from below. "It seems random, but all of those small things translate to that direct memory of the fans," Miyamoto says.

Because it's been ingrained in pop culture for half a lifetime, it's easy to forget how imaginative, psychedelic and, well, deeply weird the world of Mario is. Magic mushrooms that make you bigger? A rainbow-colored racetrack in space? A fire-breathing reptile who ravages kingdoms with his floating pirate ship?

Illumination was tasked with making sure these concepts were believable within the logic of a movie. It's a goal that, for the directors, extended as far as justifying why there are floating blocks in the Mushroom Kingdom, despite their explanation never making it into the film.

"Our idea was that there's a mineral that's natural to the Mushroom Kingdom, which we call

Mario (voiced by Chris Pratt) and Luigi (voiced by Charlie Day)

Nintendo/Illumination Entertainment/Universal Pictures

> "When Kotabe asked, 'Who is this character?,' I told him, 'Mario is a person who will never hurt any other people.'"
> Shigeru Miyamoto

'floatanium,' because it sounded funny to us," Horvath says. "The Toads mine it and transform it into these blocks and use them for construction purposes."

One reason Meledandri's movies are successful is that "he's allergic to exposition," says Jelenic. "We never slow down and explain where the mushrooms came from and how they make your particles grow."

After all, "if you look at Mario through the lens of a superhero, it's no weirder than Peter Parker being bit by a spider and gaining superpowers," says Horvath.

Mario wasn't the only character who needed fleshing out. In the movie, Black plays a heavy metal-inspired Bowser whose relationship with Peach isn't quite captor and captive. And while he "needed to be evil enough that the stakes are high for the characters," according to Miyamoto, "Bowser has evolved into a unique, lovable villain. You do find cuteness in him." For Black, the challenge was playing both those notes. "I needed to bring the fire, thunder and brimstone," he says, "while also finding the sympathetic parts of Bowser."

Meanwhile, Peach, formerly a passive royal in need of saving, blossomed into a fearless leader.

"In the games, we kept Peach as a damsel in distress who is rescued by Mario for a while, but we wanted to make her a playable character and a more powerful princess," Miyamoto says. "We pushed that even further for the movie."

While the film is teeming with Easter eggs and fan-favorite cameos, the specificity never overshadows the story of an Everyman who must save the world. That hero's journey is familiar enough to appeal to viewers who haven't spent entire weekends in pursuit of the next checkpoint. Besides, Mario has become globally recognizable, so much so that even those who have never held a controller can identify his stout silhouette or hum Koji Kondo's bouncy theme music, which features prominently in the film.

And because Mario has been a cultural force for decades, his cinematic adventure has multigenerational appeal. Black, a Mario mega-fan since the '80s, says it's the first movie he's made that resonates with his teenagers.

"My sons are at that 'leave me alone' phase of their lives, but with this movie they're all, 'Yo, Dad, what's up with the premiere? Can we come?'" Black says. "I'm stoked that Mario has made my kids care about my career."

A

As he enters his eighth decade, Miyamoto has spent much of his life designing new challenges for his flagship character and, in turn, himself. But as the Nintendo legend embarks on his next level, he shows no signs of slowing down. Hollywood is far from Miyamoto's final boss.

A few days after the interview, Miyamoto appears at the opening of Super Nintendo World at Universal Studios Hollywood. Dashing out of a giant green warp pipe, Miyamoto amps up an adoring crowd about to enter the physical manifestation of a place that once only existed on their screens. Fist-pumping the sky, he receives howling cheers reminiscent of rock concerts. Posing next to Mario and Peach, Miyamoto is a celebrity. After all, he's spent most of his life in the public eye, serving as the face of Nintendo. But according to Miyamoto, he struggles in the limelight.

"When I get attention, I get hesitant and shy," he says. Then, comparing himself to his self-proclaimed child, he adds, "I do not want Mario to be a superhero that is always on a pedestal. I want him to be a normal guy who doesn't seek attention too much."

You get the sense Miyamoto would rather be hunched over his desk, dreaming up new worlds, than basking in the applause. There, his guiding philosophy can be summed up by a cherished memory. That morning in Burbank, he recalls playing the 1999 Sega rhythm game Samba de Amigo with his neighbor, a lawyer, as their children surrounded them, watching their dads shake controllers shaped like maracas and dance along to the TV.

"That made me realize that we should focus on the shared experience. It was truly an 'aha' moment to see kids enjoying their dads playing video games," Miyamoto says, his eyes sparkling with nostalgia. "That changed our direction."

Miyamoto laughs gently and then, after a brief pause, reveals what his unwavering mission is all about: "creating a joyful family experience in the living room." Only now, those connections will be made in movie theaters around the world.

As "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" eyes high scores at the box office, Meledandri's connections to Nintendo have only grown stronger. The animation executive now holds a shiny spot on Nintendo's board, having been appointed as an outside director in 2021. Still, he and Miyamoto are tight-lipped about the future of their Mario empire. When asked about potential sequels, or projects adapted from other Nintendo properties, Meledandri smiles knowingly, and delivers a line that feels rehearsed: "Our focus right now is entirely on bringing the film out to the audience, and at this time, we're not prepared to talk about what's coming in the future."

But the Illumination chief isn't willing to leave it there, teasing, "I definitely wouldn't rule anything out." ●

BROADWAY'S NEW KING

BARTLETT SHER IS MOUNTING AN AMBITIOUS PRODUCTION OF 'CAMELOT' AT LINCOLN CENTER, BUT

WILL AARON SORKIN'S FIRST MUSICAL CONNECT WITH THE CROWDS?

By Trish Deitch

Photographs by Amy Lombard

It's the second day of tech rehearsals for the new adaptation of Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot," the 1960 musical based on the Arthurian legend — this time rewritten by Aaron Sorkin — at the Vivian Beaumont in Lincoln Center. All around the theater are long tables shrouded in black cloth where tech people are writing on notepads, flipping switches and speaking quietly into headsets, their eyes never leaving the 4,000-square-foot stage suspended above the orchestra pit like a massive UFO. Actors in medieval costumes are talking in small groups, choreographers are nervously pacing, a producer is heatedly whispering, and Bartlett Sher, 64, the director, is standing in an aisle near the back, watching silently, like a captain on the prow of his ship.

There are problems getting from one scene to the next: Can Phillipa Soo, playing King Arthur's new wife, Guenevere, get out of her tight leather pants and ruffled shirt and into her formfitting blue velvet dress in under 37 seconds? How can the knights shed their heavy, floor-length cloaks quickly if they can't undo the clasps? Should the lights be up when actors bring in the tables, chairs and rug that signify the king's study, or is that revealing too much sausage-making? And the metal wall that slides down fast from the ceiling into the middle of all this — what if a knight or a lady-in-waiting loses a toe?

No matter, they'll try the transition again. The stage manager calls for the scene to start, and everyone takes their places. Merlin, Arthur's mentor, is dead, and Arthur, devastated, wonders how he'll be able to create a new order in Camelot — in which everyone has a voice and laws are just — without the man on whom he relies for guidance. On his knees, the young king says goodbye to his teacher, as a curly-headed pianist in a button-down shirt plays a mournful tune and a flock of knights becomes a chorus of baritone sorrow. Then Arthur rises, steps to center stage, and in pure Sorkin fashion, says, "What the hell do I do now?!"

Suddenly the hall is filled with loud, buoyant music. Guenevere rushes off, stage left; the knights exit, stage right; and, after a moment, men in black armor rush in with props. The conductor, standing in the otherwise empty pit, waves her arms, and the choreographers conspicuously snap their fingers to speed things up. All the while, Sher, in the same black sweatshirt and baggy black pants he'll wear every time I meet up with him, watches, expressionless.

When the scene is done, he comes back to where I'm sitting and says, in a whisper, "That was a disaster." He pushes a long lock of silver hair behind his ear and smiles, because in Bart Sher's world, a disaster just might be the most fun thing ever.

After 18 months of COVID-related closures, Broadway has begun to come back to its pre-pandemic self. A revival of "Sweeney Todd" with Josh Groban, a reimagining of "Parade" with Ben Platt, and the Jessica Chastain-led "A Doll's House" have all played to packed houses — and Lea Michele has made "Funny Girl" soar again. But if the hard-won rebound is to continue, there needs to be a few more hits for avid theatergoers and tourists.

With "Camelot," Lincoln Center is resurrecting one of the stage's best-known shows. And in Sher and Sorkin, they are turning to two of the most successful artists in modern theater, a duo who joined forces in 2018 to turn "To Kill a Mockingbird" into the highest-grossing American play in Broadway history. Not only that, but Sher — regarded as one of the finest American stage directors working today — has been Lincoln Center's most consistent hit-maker, with revivals of "South Pacific" and "My Fair Lady" running for 1,000 and 509 performances, respectively. But has Sher, who has found ways to dust off creaky musicals and make them relevant to contemporary audiences, met his match in "Camelot"? After all, the initial production's optimistic look at how ethical leaders harness power to forge better worlds seems hopelessly naive in this divided political environment. Or maybe not — maybe "Camelot" is just what we need.

In 1971, in Sher's hometown of San Francisco, there was a funeral for a policeman in the neighborhood where he lived, and the door of the church where the service was being held was blown off by the radical group the Weathermen. Sher, the fifth child in a string of seven, was 12 at the time and heard the explosion from his sixth-grade classroom. "It was cool," he says today, sitting in his small, windowless office at Lincoln

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Joan Marcus

Phillipa Soo (top center) and others sing "The Lusty Month of May" in "Camelot"; previous page: Sher in his office by the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center.

Center, where he has been the resident director for the past 14 years. Knowing how that might sound, he quickly adds that no one was killed, or even hurt. But in "the gray space," as Sher calls it, between him and me — the place where deeper meanings are silently conveyed — I can see why he called a domestic terrorist attack in his childhood neighborhood "cool": Because San Francisco in 1971, alive with the electric energy of cultural transformation, was blowing open young Bart Sher's mind.

Sher's office is a mess: Books are stacked every which way on mismatched shelves, and black-and-white photos from stages around the world are stuck on the walls in flimsy black frames. To find something on Sher's desk requires an archaeological excavation, though when he wants to show you a book — one of the bibles written by Tadeusz Kantor or Giorgio Strehler, the European avant-garde directors who, along with Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka and French director Ariane Mnouchkine, have influenced him most — Sher knows exactly under which pile it's hiding.

Though he's clearly brilliant, well-read and confident in his abilities as a director, Sher's also a mensch. If he has a big ego, it's pretty well hidden. Sorkin says, "He's a great director. And if it needed to, his talent would excuse any bad behavior. But he's also a very nice guy."

I meet Sher three times over the course of two weeks, for instance, and twice I'm late (let's blame the New York subways). The second time, I come into the restaurant mortified — how could I have again kept this busy, important man waiting at a table by himself? I can't stop apologizing. Finally, he moves to the edge of the booth where I can see all of him, and he says, "Do I look angry?" He sits calmly looking at me with no rancor at all on his face. And that's that. We go on with our interview, in which he is, as usual, a really fun college professor leading the world's best seminar.

He seems genuinely happy when I tell him that my mother took me to the theater when I was child, and he says, "Well, you don't have to lie down on railroad tracks to know what it feels like to be hit by a train. ..." I look at him quizzically and laugh, and he says, "... in terms of why theater matters," and smiles. Then he goes on: "It's an extraordinary exercise for you to explore conflicts, external realities, places you haven't gone that open up in front you without *trauma* — without damage to you. It can be the deepest tragedy, the most incredible comedy, the most beautiful musical, the most powerful opera; all of these have this deep resonance inside of us. And so for kids to go see these things — for your mom to be so smart as to bring you to that — is to open up the world to you."

Sher's own first big theatrical experience, he says, happened when he was 11: It was a Grateful Dead concert at the Winterland in San Francisco. He'd seen good theater at his Catholic grammar school — he'd even enjoyed putting the colored cellophane over the lights in preparation for a Virgin Mary Christmas play — but there was something about the transcendent experience of the Dead's endless jams, and the audience members willingness to open their minds and go with it, that never left him.

"When we see Aaron's play, we wonder whether we've lost our *own* Camelot. Is there something that's perhaps broken and falling apart. Can we get that back?"

BARTLETT SHER

"Camelot" is one of eight plays that Sher has in production right now. There's also "Pictures From Home," starring Nathan Lane, on Broadway; three shows in regional theaters across the United States; and three in England, including "My Fair Lady," in which Eliza Doolittle leaves Professor Higgins at the end, and the Sorkin-penned "To Kill a Mockingbird," where Atticus Finch is not the great white savior he is in the 1962 film, but a more divided man — a '30s liberal who also believes in segregation. Sher directs operas, too, and one of them, Gaetano Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'Amore," will be coming back to the Met this season.

He sees himself as an interpretive artist ("like a conductor," he says), rather than a creative artist ("like a composer"), and he exhaustively researches the history of every play he works on — and the political and cultural context in which it was written — until he feels he understands what the author intended. He's not imposing his ideas on a play or preaching to his audience. He's creating a work of art that he feels reflects the playwright's vision.

The original "Camelot" is entwined with the Kennedy era, because the late president loved the show, and, according to Jackie, used to sing songs from it like "If I Ever I Would Leave You." A week after Kennedy's assassination, Jackie told a reporter that the possibility of a Camelot here in America was over, dashed with the president's murder. To this day, people of that generation sometimes weep when they hear the soundtrack.

Back in his office, though, Sher says, "Great plays come around when you need them." So it makes sense that, in 2018, with democracy fraying at the edges, André Bishop, Lincoln Center's artistic director, suggested to Sher that they put on a concert version of "Camelot" for the gala that year. Lin-Manuel Miranda's mother loved the original show, and so Miranda agreed to play Arthur for that one night. Later, Miranda suggested that Sher revive the play, this time with a better book — one by Sorkin, a master scribe when it comes to the romance of American politics.

Sorkin studied musical theater at Syracuse, but had never written a musical. Yet the project made sense to him. "You know," he says, "here's a show that lends itself to the idea that we should reach for the stars, even if we fail. That suits me." He adds, "I didn't want it to be a museum piece. I didn't want it to be an exercise in nostalgia. I wanted it to be about *now*. I wanted this King Arthur to grow up to be Martin Sheen in 'The West Wing.'"

Sorkin's "Camelot" is shorter, and almost all the dialogue is new. The first one was filled with sorcery and magic, and the updated version has none. Arthur, a commoner who becomes king after being the only man able to pull a sword from a stone, dreams of evolving his lawless kingdom into a kind of utopia, by creating a council of men — the Knights of the Round Table — and a system of government where everyone is equal under the law, and those laws are enacted fairly.

In Sorkin's version, Guenevere enters the picture as the brilliant daughter of the king of France, not just a pretty girl, and so in all ways she's equal to, if not smarter and more majestic than, Arthur, who, while lovely, is still a boy. So though Arthur and Guenevere are partners in this plan for a wonderful new age in Camelot, it's not surprising that she falls for a very experienced and confident knight, Lancelot, and he for her, despite the fact that he's devoted to Arthur and Arthur to him.

Guenevere and Lancelot don't even kiss in this new version, understanding how disastrous that would be, until one night when Arthur's illegitimate son, who lusts for the throne, manipulates the situation so that the two are thrown together and make love while Arthur is away. They are caught, tried and sentenced to death.

It's a tragic story about our longing for what's good and our tendency toward darkness. And it's actually heartbreaking, at the end of the play, when you realize that the dream of democracy — and a marriage with so much potential — could fail because of very human frailties all around.

"When we see Aaron's play," Sher says, "we wonder whether we've lost our *own* Camelot. Where are *we* as a country? Is there something that's perhaps broken and falling apart? Can we get that back? That's the very deepest subtextual level at which I'm trying to answer the question, 'Why "Camelot"?' And when we betray our own values and do something because of our own personal desires and impulses versus who we *are* — that makes for good theater."

"What if you fail?" I ask Sher over dinner. We're having meatballs and polenta, which he's had many times before, but he's devouring them. "Oh, come on," he says. "It's so *fun*, if you aren't putting on yourself the pressure of success. I'm there to explore. *Of course* we want it to succeed, but that's not the issue — it's not the issue for my vision to be realized. The issue for me is to lead everybody towards *something*."

I don't quite understand how a man this worldly — so steeped in global experimental theater — ends up directing big American musicals like "Camelot."

"I think as artists who are Americans," he says, "we have a responsibility to explore our own history, and to bring everything we know of our craft to the work that speaks to our people. And I think the American canon — and the American experience of who we are on every level — *must* be reinvestigated. The history of who we are is changing radically, in the same way that it was changing for Rodgers and Hammerstein or Thornton Wilder or Tennessee Williams or August Wilson. We're trying to evaluate who we *were* and who we *are*." He gingerly takes a bite of salad and adds, "That's what I like to do, make connections between things."

Back at the tech rehearsal, three knights are silently moving down the stage in the direction of the seats, their black cloaks dragging on the ground behind them. I say to Sher, who's standing in the row in front of me, that it looks Shakespearean.

He says, "I'm trying to make this feel like a history play. Because, you know, it's Arthur. And because Aaron's language is elevated and powerful. So I'm trying to lift it to a kind of *real* place."

"As opposed to what?" I ask, and Sher leans toward me, makes fluttery jazz hands up around his ears, and whispers, "*Theater-y*." ●

THE WARNER

BROS.

HOW FOUR ENTERPRISING BROTHERS BUILT THE STORIED STUDIO THAT HAS ENDURED AS A PILLAR OF HOLLYWOOD FROM THE GOLDEN AGE TO THE PRESENT DAY

CENTURY

Warner Bros. iconoclasts then and now: Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca" (1942); Austin Butler in "Elvis" (2022)

BAND OF BROTHERS

THE HOUSE THAT SAM, HARRY, ALBERT AND JACK BUILT HAS BEEN STURDY ENOUGH TO EVOLVE OVER A CENTURY IN AN EVER-CHANGING HOLLYWOOD

By Cynthia Littleton

David Zaslav went office-furniture shopping when he moved into the executive building on the Warner Bros. lot last year. The new CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery had Jack L. Warner's large dark-wood desk pulled out of storage for his use. He also found a leather legal pad holder once clutched by another of his predecessors at the storied studio: Steven J. Ross.

Zaslav wanted these totems in his sunken workspace overlooking Olive Avenue in Burbank to show the formidable legacy, in business and in popular culture, he has inherited.

"I wanted them to remind me that we need to show as much courage now in leading this business as the Warner brothers did in launching it

"The motion picture business sharpened our view about what it means to be an American," says David Zaslav, here at The Beverly Hills Hotel in 2021. Photograph by Art Streiber

(Previous spread) Bogart: Everett Collection; Elvis: Warner Bros. Pictures

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one hundred years ago," Zaslav says.

As the studio marks the centennial of its incorporation as Warner Bros. Pictures Inc. (the official date is April 4, 1923), the company has never been more focused on using the wealth of intellectual property assets, the production expertise and the global distribution muscle built up over the past 100 years to power its second century. The vast Warner Bros. movie and TV library is the foundation of WB Discovery's empire-building ambition to transition from traditional cable to direct-to-consumer streaming.

But the 12,500 movies and 2,400 TV programs in the vault aren't the only elements of the past guiding Warner Bros.' future. From its earliest days, the studio built by four brothers (Harry, Sam, Albert and Jack) who ran nickelodeons and silent movie theaters in Pennsylvania and Ohio has had a distinct profile to its storytelling and an ethos on how to wield its influence. Where MGM offered lavish escapism, flowing gowns and tuxedos, Warner Bros. served up from-the-headlines realism, potboilers and melodramas that often touched on social ills and other contemporary themes. Warner Bros. pioneered the gangster movie ("Little Caesar," "The Public Enemy") and turned Bette Davis loose on-screen in dozens of 1930s films that helped establish the archetype of young American women as tough, smart and sassy — nobody's fools.

"MGM was the glamour studio. Warner Bros. was a grittier studio," says film critic and historian Leonard Maltin. "It showed in the kinds of stars they hired and nurtured. They went for unlikely people who didn't fit conventional definitions of beauty or handsomeness: Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart. The brisk pace and torn-from-the-headlines stories — none of that was accidental or coincidental. That was Warner Bros.' stock in trade."

Harry, the oldest, functioned as CEO in his role as president of Warner Bros. Pictures. Sam was essentially chief technology officer and chief operating officer. Albert oversaw all distribution operations, while Jack, who was nearly 11 years younger than Harry, called the shots as the showman with a vision for production and creative talent.

The brothers had a lot of experience by the time they raised the iconic WB shield logo on the West Coast as Warner Bros. Pictures. The foursome had been active in the "amusements" business and distribution of silent features and shorts since the late 1900s. They moved into producing their own movies soon after. The efforts of the brothers Warner began to gain traction — and notice in the pages of *Variety* — around 1917 and '18 with silents such as "Are Passions Inherited?" and "My Four Years in Germany."

Courtesy Variety Archives

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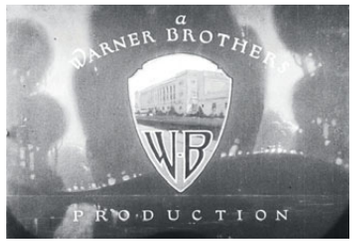
ENIGMATIC EMBLEM

LIKE THE STUDIO ITSELF, WARNER BROS.' ICONIC SHIELD LOGO HAS EVOLVED WITH THE TIMES



Silent Film logo from the early 1920s

The logo in the late '20s

In 1970, when Steven J. Ross acquired Warner Bros., the logo added a new name

1973 logo designed by Saul Bass

Current Warner Bros. logo

Warner Bros. was a forerunner of today's modern media conglomerates. Led by Harry and Sam, it very strategically pursued growth through acquisitions. The brothers bought Vitagraph Studios in 1925 for its sound technology assets — and wound up revolutionizing the film business with the release of the first mainstream "talking picture," 1927's "The Jazz Singer" starring Al Jolson. (Fun fact: Early on, *Variety* referred to sound films as "talkers" rather than "talkies.")

In 1928, WB bought Stanley Corp. of America theaters and First National Pictures, which came with the 85-acre lot in Burbank that the studio still calls home. In the 1930s, Harry picked up a slew of sheet music publishing companies, then launched the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoon production imprints to promote the songs.

"The family had two extraordinary visionaries in Sam and Harry," says Cass Warner, who is Harry's granddaughter. "They saw the potential of putting movies together with music and sound."

Sam's story could be a movie unto itself. Known as a perfectionist, he would pull off miracles that kept the studio afloat. In 1925, his interest in burgeoning communications technology led Warner Bros. to become the first Hollywood studio to invest in broadcasting, with the launch of Los Angeles radio station KFWB (aka Keep Fighting, Warner Bros.). From there, he threw himself into readying the company's Vitaphone synchronized sound system to impress moviegoers at the Oct. 6, 1927, premiere of "The Jazz Singer" at the flagship Warner Bros. Theater in New York. The day before the studio's greatest industry triumph, Sam would die at a Los Angeles hospital of a sinus infection that led to pneumonia. When Harry Warner rushed from the East Coast to be with his brother, he changed to a special private train in Albuquerque to speed up his arrival in Los Angeles, but he still was four hours too late, as *Variety* reported in its Oct. 12, 1927, obituary for Sam.

In the wake of "The Jazz Singer" — and its famous promise, "You ain't heard nothin' yet" — Warner Bros.' competitors had no choice but to embrace sound and race to catch up. The big bet on innovation energized the studio that had previously banked on a German shepherd named Rin Tin Tin as its biggest box office draw. Warner Bros. has not only been a titan of Hollywood ever since, it's been a force in exporting American culture and ideals around the globe.

"They were producing over 100 movies a year in the 1930s," says David Zaslav. "Back then, if you lived on a farm or in a small town, movies were how you saw the world, how you learned what New York looked like, how people would dress to go on a date. The motion picture business sharpened our view about what it means to be an American."

Harry Warner in particular was deeply patriotic, idealistic and observant of his Jewish faith. At his direction, the studio produced issue-oriented movies such as "The Black Legion," which took on the Ku Klux Klan, and historical dramas such as 1937's "The Life of Emile Zola," which bagged WB's first best picture Oscar. "Confessions of a Nazi Spy" in 1939 was one of Hollywood's first efforts to address the rising tide of fascism in Germany. Around that time, Warner Bros. was the first major Hollywood player to stop doing business, on principle, with Hitler's Germany.

The studio's success took the Warner family to unimaginable heights and, inevitably, emotional lows, most notably the notorious sale of much of the studio's library that Jack orchestrated in 1956. He encouraged Harry and Albert to sell their shares — and then secretly bought them back and stayed atop the studio until it was sold again in 1967 to Seven Arts Prods. Two years later, Kinney Corp., a conglomerate that got its start operating parking lots and funeral homes, acquired Warner Bros.-Seven Arts. Kinney chief Steven J. Ross took the studio reins, setting the company on the path to becoming Time Warner, the largest media company in the world, after its merger with Time Inc., in 1990.

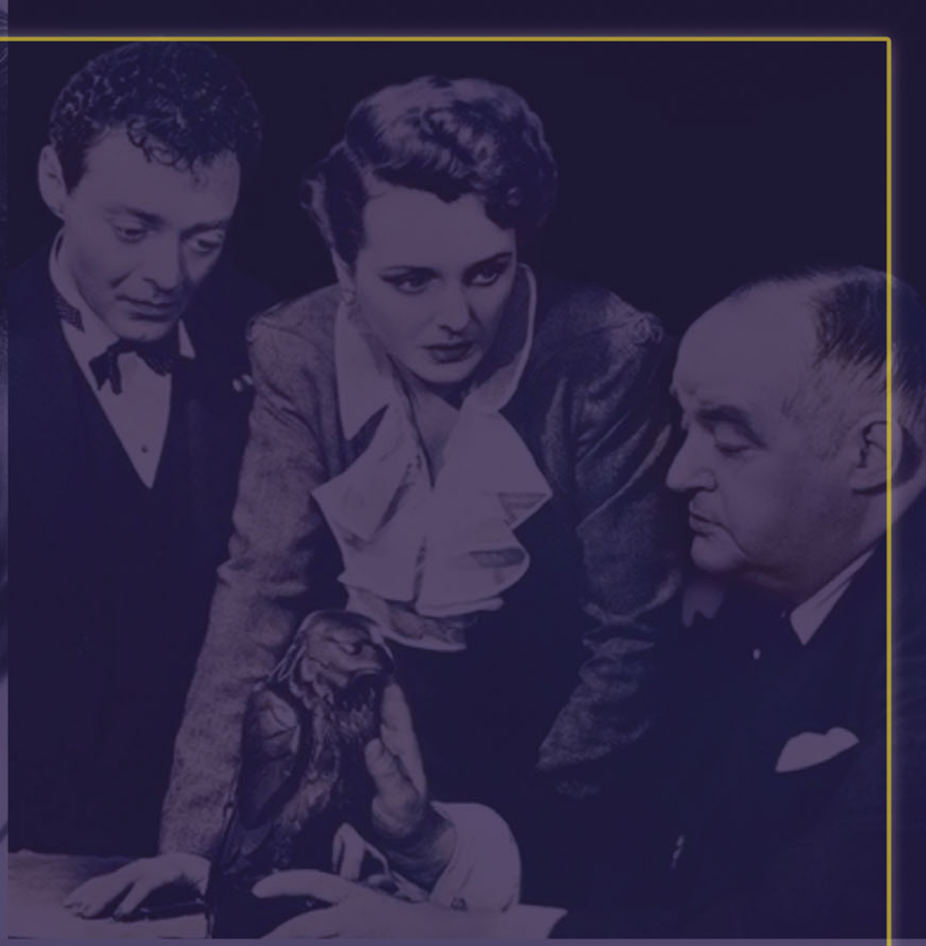
For Cass Warner, who has documented the family history in books and the 2007 documentary "The Brothers Warner," seeing the shield reach the century mark feels "very validating" for the work put in by her grandfather and granduncles. Harry and Albert were still estranged from Jack at the time of their deaths (in 1958 and 1967, respectively). Jack Warner died at 86 in 1978.

Cass Warner has high praise for Zaslav and his team, who connected with her early on after closing the deal with AT&T to acquire WarnerMedia in April 2022.

"They would be so happy to see that their dream was still alive and well and expanding," Warner says. "My grandfather would be thrilled to see all the new ways that people can communicate with each other. The company's original motto was 'Pictures that educate, enlighten and entertain.' He really believed in that." ●

Tim Gray contributed to this report.

Courtesy WBD



Here's looking at you,
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Congratulations on 100 years of creating
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And thank you for always reminding us
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MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION

THE SEARCHERS

TRUE-LIFE TALES, GRITTY REALISM AND MARQUEE FILMMAKERS ARE THE HALLMARK OF WARNER BROS. PICTURES

By Todd Gilchrist

(This page) Everett Collection (2); (Opposite page) Barbie: Jaap Buitendijk/Warner Bros.; Maltese Falcon: Everett Collection

From pre-Code gangster films to Bette Davis blazing a trail for female protagonists to blockbuster superhero sagas, Warner Bros. Pictures' output has been synonymous with the most popular stories of the day — and the iconic filmmakers who brought them to life. Since being installed in June 2022, Warner Bros. Pictures Group co-chairs and CEOs Michael De Luca and Pamela Abdy have steadily built upon this legacy that has been the foundation of the studio since its earliest days.

"The history of the studio and their approach to filmmaking over the years really lines up with our belief in marrying the right filmmakers with the right IP and the right stories," Abdy tells *Variety*. Adds De Luca, "We just wanted to continue that practice of trying to be a good home for the preeminent filmmakers of the day — and then try and find that next generation as well."

Clint Eastwood, who's been a Warners mainstay since he was invited in 1971 to set up his production company Malpaso Prods. on the studio lot, credits the longevity of his partnership with the studio to two things: trust and freedom. "A few times they probably thought I was crazy, like with 'Every Which Way but Loose,'" Eastwood remembers. "The consensus was that it was a risk after 'Dirty Harry,' but I enjoyed the read and thought it was fun."

All these years later, Eastwood is still grateful that the leadership of Warners in that era took a chance on an offbeat concept — he famously stars with an orangutan — that wound up performing well at the box office.

"They weren't afraid to do something a little different," Eastwood says. "Maybe some of the stories didn't resonate with them, but they always said, 'Let's give it a go.'"

In addition to extending a relationship with "Elvis" director Baz Luhrmann that began in 2013 on

100 (PLUS) YEARS OF WARNER BROS.

"The Jazz Singer" (1927)

The first mention of the budding movie moguls in *Variety* came in the March 2, 1917, edition with a review of the now-lost silent film "Are Passions Inherited?" Our critic praised the staging of the picture's fight scenes — but not much else. By the time Warner Bros. Pictures was incorporated in April 1923, the brothers were already established industry leaders. And they weren't shy about marketing themselves and the studio's successes. In the depths of the Depression, the studio's many advertisements in *Variety* all carried the prideful declaration: "What Warner Bros. Promise Warner Bros. Deliver." "The history of movies is the history of people," says Hollywood historian Leonard Maltin. "Machines and algorithms don't make movies — people do." Here's a sampling of WB's defining moments and signature releases:

"The Great Gatsby" and helping George Miller through postproduction of his upcoming "Mad Max Fury Road" prequel "Furiosa," Abdy and De Luca have assembled a murderer's row of filmmakers whose work delivers both distinctive artistic visions and record-breaking box office numbers. "After success with 'The Batman,' we thought Matt Reeves was an important filmmaker to formalize our relationship with for more things outside the DC universe," says De Luca.

"Mike and I have always loved to work with filmmakers over and over again," Abdy says. "Todd Phillips, we're currently working on 'Joker 2' with him and see a long future ahead of us. Bringing over M. Night [Shyamalan], we're so excited about that new relationship. ... We had both been speaking to him before we came to Warner Bros. about how we could potentially work together."

The combination of good stories and great filmmakers has crystallized the idea for Abdy and De Luca of championing filmmakers as intellectual property unto themselves. "If you look at some of the great directors of all time, whether it's Spielberg, Paul Thomas Anderson, Todd Phillips, Clint Eastwood or Nancy Meyers, there's a relationship the audience has with those filmmakers," Abdy says. "And the filmmakers become a brand that engages the audience to go out and go see their movies in the same way as movie stars."

De Luca sees a sea change happening in the content business that plays to WB's strengths.

"The era of volume is over, and the era of curation and quality control is beginning," he observes. "Being good isn't good enough anymore. You have to be excellent. And the only way to hedge that bet is to try and be in business with the best storytellers." ●

Fierce femmes then and now: Bette Davis (opposite page) in "Jezebel" (1938); Margot Robbie in "Barbie" (2023)

•→ MARCH 12, 1920

"Abe Warner Wants a Studio": *Variety* reports Albert is heading West to search for a studio lot for their growing production activity.

•→ JUNE 25, 1930

"Pacemakers of the Amusement World": The brothers spare no expense to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their entry into showbiz in a *Variety* special edition. By then, WB employed 18,500 people and had an annual payroll of $36.7 million.

•→ JULY 27, 1940

"A Wild Hare": Bugs Bunny makes his formal big screen debut with his catchphrase "What's up, doc?"

"The Maltese Falcon" (1941)

•→ MARCH 15, 1944

"De Havilland Free Agent": *Daily Variety*'s banner headline on the landmark ruling in the legal battle Olivia De Havilland waged against the studio — and won

School days then and now:
"Welcome Back, Kotter" (1975-79);
"Abbott Elementary" (2021-present)

THE BIG BANG

WB WAS THE FIRST OF HOLLYWOOD'S PRESTIGE STUDIOS TO BREAK INTO TV, WHERE IT HAS LONG REIGNED AS THE INDUSTRY'S LARGEST SUPPLIER OF SHOWS

By Michael Schneider

In the 1950s, the motion picture industry wanted nothing to do with the young medium of television — but Jack Warner soon realized that was a losing battle.

Warner Bros. was among the first to dive into TV production, when ABC approached the studio about acquiring a theatrical film package. But instead of just running films on TV, the result was "Warner Bros. Presents," an umbrella series that debuted in 1955 and comprised programs based on existing intellectual property including "Casablanca" and "Cheyenne."

The success of "Cheyenne" ushered the era of the Western to television, as Warner Bros. (initially under Warner's son-in-law, William T. Orr) brought a movie studio approach to the small screen. "There's a spirit of independence and innovation that's so much a part of the legacy of the studio," says Warner Bros. TV chairman Channing Dungey.

Other early Warner Bros. TV hits included "Maverick" and crime dramas such as "Hawaiian Eye" and "77 Sunset Strip." That legacy continued with "The F.B.I." and in the 1970s, sitcoms like "Alice" and "Welcome Back, Kotter," the Lynda Carter-led genre hit "Wonder Woman," actioner "The Dukes of Hazzard" and the landmark miniseries "Roots."

In the 1980s came sitcoms like "Growing Pains" and "Murphy Brown." The studio's TV fortunes were lifted following the acquisition of Lorimar, which brought hits like "Full House" and its spinoffs into the fold. The 1990s saw a string of Must-See TV hits produced for NBC, most notably "Friends" and "ER."

Dungey remembers being on the lot back then as an exec on the features side: "The shows my friends and I were all watching were being made here," she says. "The opportunity for me to come back and be a part of that incredible tradition and legacy is a dream come true."

By the 1990s and early 2000s, Warner Bros. TV was the industry's largest supplier of content to primetime, including "The West Wing," "Gilmore Girls" and "Third Watch" and unscripted fare like "The Bachelor." The studio became home to two of the most prolific producers in TV history: Chuck Lorre, who created a string of sitcom smashes (including "Two and a Half Men" and "The Big Bang Theory"), and Greg Berlanti, who turned the DC "Arrow"-verse into a valuable franchise for both Warner Bros. TV and The CW.

Much of that growth took place under Peter Roth, who ran the TV studio for 22 years before handing the baton to Dungey in 2021. Her tenure has coincided with a shift in ownership under Warner Bros. Discovery and the launch of HBO Max, now the studio's key buyer.

"I think we have somewhere between 35 and 40 projects at HBO Max when you look at scripted, unscripted and animation," Dungey says. "Our plan is for that to continue. But we sell everywhere — broadcast, basic cable, premium cable, streaming." Warner Bros. TV's current output includes Apple TV+'s "Ted Lasso" and ABC's "Abbott Elementary."

"We are fortunate to have an incredibly rich library of IP to draw from," Dungey says. "It's my goal to continue to break barriers in storytelling. I want to create content that reflects the breadth and depth of our audience. We want to continue to find and uplift new and underserved creative voices. And to keep doing what we've been doing." ●

•→ JUNE 3, 1953

"House of Warner": A gamble on 3D pays off when Vincent Price starrer "House of Wax" is a box office smash at home and abroad.

•→ FEB. 29, 1956

"WB Backlog Sale": The studio sells more than 1,000 library titles to investors behind Allied Artists for $21 million.

•→ NOV. 15, 1966

"Warner Selling to 7 Arts": Jack Warner sells his one-third stake in the studio to the production outfit for $32 million. Three years later, Steven J. Ross' Kinney Corp. scoops up WB-Seven Arts.

"Bonnie and Clyde" (1967)

•→ FEB. 2, 1977

"'Roots' Remakes TV World in 8 Nights": David L. Wolper's epic WB-produced miniseries sets viewership records.

Welcome Back Kotter: Everett Collection; Abbott Elementary: Gilles Mingasson/ABC; Bonnie & Clyde: Jerry Tavin/Everett Collection

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Superheroes then and now: "Superman" (1978); "The Batman" (2022)

CHARACTERS OF STEEL

DC FLIES INTO THE FUTURE WITH A NEW PLAN FOR BUILDING A ROBUST SUPERHERO UNIVERSE

By Adam B. Vary

The modern superhero movie would not exist without the version of Superman limned by Christopher Reeve in Warner Bros.' 1978 smash "Superman."

First created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster for Action Comics, the Man of Steel became a pop-culture mainstay with the syndicated "Adventures of Superman" TV series in the 1950s. But it wasn't until DC Comics moved into the world of Warner Bros. and Reeve donned the last son of Krypton's blue-and-red tights for the Richard Donner-directed "Superman" that bringing a comic book superhero to life on the big screen was seen as blockbuster business. And the spoils were considerable: In the moment, "Superman" ranked as WB's highest-grossing movie ever.

For the next two decades, Warner Bros. dominated superhero cinema, especially after Tim Burton's "Batman" in 1989 launched the Caped Crusader as the dark and brooding yin to Superman's virtuous and hopeful yang. By 2008's "The Dark Knight," more than a dozen DC Comics live-action adaptations had earned upward of $4.4 billion in unadjusted global grosses. That same year, however, Marvel Studios' "Iron Man" debuted; in the 2010s, despite successfully launching Wonder Woman and Aquaman into their own lucrative film franchises, DC was forced to live under the considerable box office shadow of its longtime rival.

Cut to 2023. On Jan. 30, DC Studios took one giant leap to reassert its place in the comic book firmament, when newly installed co-chiefs James Gunn (director of Marvel's "Guardians of the Galaxy" franchise) and Peter Safran (producer of DC's "Aquaman" and "Shazam!") unveiled the first chapter of their vision for the future of the unit at a media event on the Warner Bros. lot. For the first time since WB and DC became one in 1969 (when the studio was acquired by Steven J. Ross' Kinney Corp., which owned DC), stories from the comic trove will unfold with creative coordination across film, TV animation and gaming.

"They're on a mission," Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav says of Gunn and Safran. The blueprint for expanding DC's footprint in the biz is closely intertwined with the big-picture strategy for Warner Bros. overall.

To start, DC is going back to where it all began with "Superman: Legacy," which Gunn will write and direct for an expected July 11, 2025, release date. The film "focuses on Superman balancing his Kryptonian heritage with his human upbringing," Safran said in January.

But don't expect a retread. "I don't think the movie would be worth making if it was just a redo of any other Superman adaptation," Gunn tells *Variety*. "For us to truly thrive as a studio, we need to honor the past of these characters while simultaneously seeing them in a new light."

Batman is also getting a reboot with "The Brave and the Bold," a feature film showcasing the superhero's relationship with a maladjusted Robin.

Gunn and Safran aren't just relying on DC's marquee heroes, however. They're also planning films about more obscure characters, like the Swamp Thing. It's all designed to broaden DC's horizons — and bring a wider diversity of storytelling to audiences.

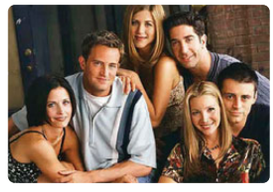
"We think there's a lot of potential in some of these lesser-known characters to be the stars of the DC of the future," Gunn says. ●

•→ NOV. 20, 1980

"Wells, Daly Top WB Echelon": The 1980s begin with a management shake-up as former CBS president Bob Daly moves to WB as co-CEO with Frank Wells (who would exit for Disney in 1984).

•→ MARCH 6, 1989

"Time Now on Warner's Side": Warner Communications and Time Inc. set $18 billion merger agreement.



"Friends" (1994-2004)

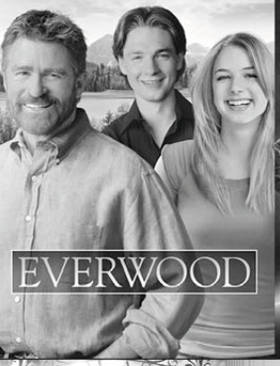
•→ SEPT. 19, 1994

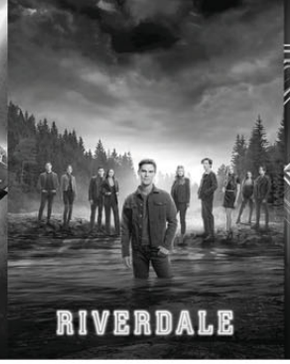
"Concept Is OK": "Friends," the WB-produced ensembler that defined the modern sitcom, gets a fair-to-middling review from *Variety* three days before its NBC bow.

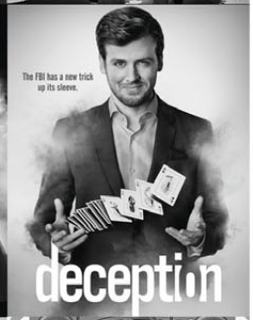
•→ AUG. 30, 1995

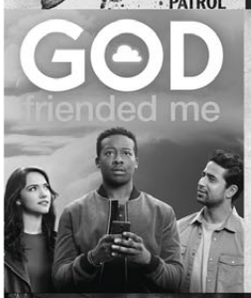
"The Time Is Right": Warner Bros. is about to be reunited with the film library sold off in 1956 when Time Warner acquires Ted Turner's Turner Broadcasting.

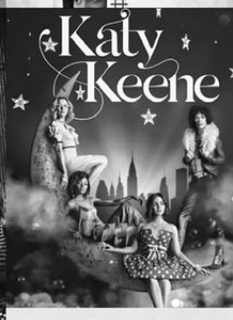
Superman: Everett Collection; The Batman: Jonathan Olley/Warner Bros.; Friends: NBCUniversal/Getty Images

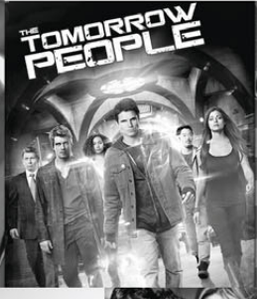


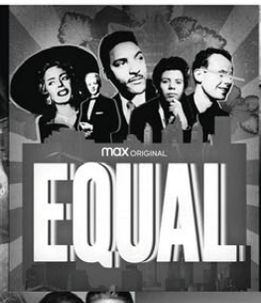


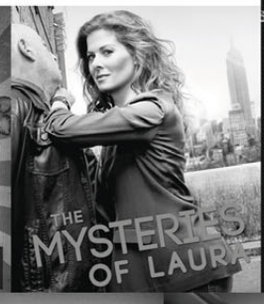


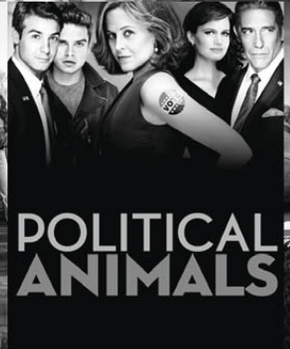












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SOUND REVOLUTION

A YEAR BEFORE 'THE JAZZ SINGER,' WARNER BROS. DEMONSTRATED THE ARTISTIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF 'SYNCHRONIZED' SOUND WITH THE 1926 JOHN BARRYMORE STARRER 'DON JUAN'

By Cynthia Littleton

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"DON JUAN" IS ANSWER TO MAIDEN'S PRAYER

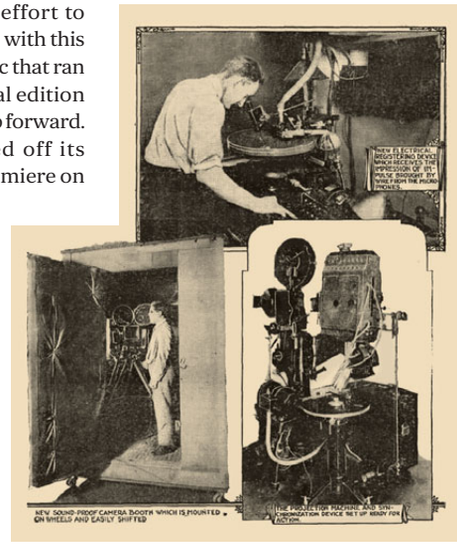
John Barrymore Picture Has Everything in It That Will Appeal to Women

Al Jolson starrer "The Jazz Singer" changed everything about the movie business. But months before Jolson's voice rang out in theaters, Warner Bros. delivered the first hint of adding audio to motion pictures with the 1926 John Barrymore vehicle "Don Juan."

The silent film was enhanced by several musical selections and sound effects that were reproduced in theaters by a Vitaphone-built device placed next to the projector. This synchronized-sound technology was not destined to last long, even though sound was clearly poised to revolutionize movies. *Variety* made a valiant effort to explain how it all worked with this steampunk-esque graphic that ran in our Aug. 7, 1926, special edition on "Don Juan's" great leap forward.

Warner Bros. showed off its innovation at a glitzy premiere on Aug. 6, 1926, at the Warner Theatre in Manhattan. The presentation opened with a sound-enhanced short featuring the voice of Will Hays, president of what would become the Motion Picture Assn.

"No story ever written for the screen is as dramatic as the story of the screen itself. Tonight we write another chapter in that story," Hays told the crowd. "Far, indeed, have we advanced from that few seconds of shadow of a serpentine dancer 30 years ago when the motion picture was born — to this public demonstration of the Vitaphone synchronizing the reproduction of sound with the reproduction of action." ●



The premiere was splashed across the front page of *Variety*; inside, our story used detailed photos to show readers how the system worked: (clockwise from top right) the electrical registering device that receives impulses by wire from the microphones; the projection machine and synchronization device; the soundproof camera booth mounted on wheels for easy movement.

•→ JAN. 11, 2000

"AOL to Buy Time Warner for $350 Billion": So begins the deal destined to become the biggest corporate merger disaster (for shareholders) in U.S. history.

"Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" (2001)

•→ NOV. 19, 2001

"B.O. Goes Whole Hogwarts": "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," the first of eight films in the franchise, grabs a record-setting $93.5 million domestically in its opening weekend.

•→ OCT. 10, 2007

"Doing Pretty Well": The WB-produced comedy "The Big Bang Theory" impresses in its first few weeks on CBS, on its way to becoming a hugely profitable juggernaut.

•→ JUNE 20, 2018

"High Anxiety": A week after AT&T bought Time Warner for $108 billion, *Variety* reported on the "trepidation" among insiders about the Dallas-based telco team taking over. Three years later, AT&T cut the cord, selling WarnerMedia to Discovery Inc.

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REVIEWS

Chevalier

By Peter Debruge

FILM REVIEW

Director: Stephen Williams

Starring: Kelvin Harrison Jr., Samara Weaving, Lucy Boynton

Kelvin Harrison Jr. stars as Joseph Bologne in "Chevalier."

Larry Horricks/Searchlight Pictures

Though his life and accomplishments were largely erased under Napoleon, the extraordinary figure at the center of Stephen Williams' "Chevalier" really did exist. Born on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, the son of a white plantation owner and his Black slave, Joseph Bologne went on to excel in spheres rarely accessible to people of color in 18th-century French society. Here was a champion swordsman and celebrated musician invited to play his violin at Versailles, where Marie Antoinette reportedly accompanied him on the harpsichord.

So why has it taken so long for his story to be told?

The time certainly seems right to rediscover the Chevalier de Saint-Georges — an honorary title akin to knighthood that reveals how high Bologne rose under France's overtly racist Code Noir, as well as a fitting name for the film. A compelling example of Black excellence dating back even before the French

Revolution, the English-language "Chevalier" doesn't feel nearly as fusty as its powdered wigs and period setting might suggest. This modern-minded if occasionally undernuanced costume drama fills a historic gap, starting with its fanciful opening scene: a violin showdown between Bologne (Kelvin Harrison Jr.) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Joseph Prowen) choreographed like a rap battle.

It's an imaginative bit of one-upmanship with which to begin, as "Chevalier" puts Mozart in the Salieri position to make its point. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about "Chevalier" is how many of Bologne's actual feats it leaves out (including his impressive military record). And perhaps the most frustrating is that the film takes enough creative liberties along the way that audiences can never be sure how much of what they're seeing is true.

That makes "Chevalier" less a definitive portrait than a fascinating departure point for further reading and research. Williams comes to the project having helmed the wrenching Tulsa Race Massacre episode of HBO's "Watchmen." There, he revealed a horrific chapter of Black history. Made on what appears to be a fraction of the budget, disguised in part by DP Jess Hall's dynamic camerawork, "Chevalier" poses a different but comparable challenge: How to do justice to a respected 18th-century composer when so much of his music has been lost?

Williams turns the fact his work was suppressed into a strength, freeing the film to modernize both Bologne's own music and the original neoclassical score that surrounds him. To that end, the director engaged two composers: Kris Bowers ("Green Book"), who gives the film its contemporary musical signature, and Michael Abels ("Get Out"), who updated and expanded what survives of Bologne's oeuvre, including the Violin Concerto No. 9, which the character defiantly performs in the film's dramatic climax.

"Chevalier" focuses primarily on an earlier chapter in Bologne's career, when the Creole multitalent sought the open position as head of the Paris Opera. In real life, Bologne's ambitions were thwarted when three leading ladies of the opera signed a petition refusing to answer to someone of mixed ancestry. "Chevalier" combines that devastating setback with several other important details from his biography, the most compelling of which were his dangerous liaisons with one Marie-Josephine (Samara Weaving).

In the film, Marie Antoinette (played as frivolous and fickle by Lucy Boynton) sanctions a contest whereby Bologne and his rival for the Paris Opera post, Christoph Gluck (Henry Lloyd-Hughes), must each compose an original opera in order to determine who gets the job. Bologne goes to work writing "Ernestine," insisting on Marie-Josephine as his muse and star — a risky move for myriad reasons. Doing so makes an enemy of opera diva La Guimard (Minnie Driver). "They are all extremely jealous of your very large … talent," she flirts from beneath her mile-high wig, changing her tune after he rejects her none-too-subtle proposition.

Between the cartoonish way that white characters telegraph their bigotry and Harrison's sly implication that Bologne isn't trying to "pass" so much as parody the French elite, the movie veers precariously close to camp at times. Each courtly bow and effete hand flourish could be read as a kind of mockery, until such point that Bologne catches his own mother (Ronkẹ Adékoluẹjo) laughing at the way he carries himself. "You look like a white boy," she teases, amplifying an identity crisis already well underway.

Under the Code Noir, French society can never fully accept Bologne as one of its own, and so "Chevalier" becomes at once a critique of insincere allies and a reminder for ambitious outsiders not to abandon their culture en route to the success they seek. In the film, when Bologne hits rock bottom, the solution is for him to reconnect with his roots, playing drums alongside a group of Black street musicians. His silly white wig serves as a symbol of his self-discovery, cast aside when it comes time to make his stand.

It's a powerful scene, bolstered by Bologne's own music. But do audiences care enough about the internal politics of French opera to turn out for this film, or would "Chevalier" have done better to focus on another chapter of the man's incredible but true life story?

CREDITS: A Searchlight Pictures release and presentation, in association with TSG Entertainment, of an Element Pictures production. **Producers:** Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe, Stefani Robinson, Dianne McGunigle. **Co-producers:** Emily Morgan, AJ Riach. **Director:** Stephen Williams. **Screenplay:** Stefani Robinson. **Camera:** Jess Hall. **Editor:** John Axelrad. **Music:** Kris Bowers. Reviewed at ABC-2 Theater, Burbank, Calif., March 1, 2023. In Toronto, Palm Springs film festivals. **MPA Rating:** PG-13. **Running time:** 107 MIN. **Cast:** Kelvin Harrison Jr., Samara Weaving, Lucy Boynton, Ronkẹ Adékoluẹjo, Marton Csokas, Alex Fitzalan, Minnie Driver, Sian Clifford, Henry Lloyd-Hughes, Joseph Prowen

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Paint

By Owen Gleiberman

Owen Wilson stars in "Paint."

FILM REVIEW

Director: Brit McAdams

Starring: Owen Wilson, Michaela Watkins

Carl Nargle (Owen Wilson), the amusingly ironic hero of "Paint" (ironic because, as we discover, he's as far from heroic as you can get), hosts a one-man instructional painting show that gets broadcast live out of the PBS station in Burlington, Vt. Each afternoon, Carl appears on camera for an hour, puffing on his pipe, holding his brushes and palette as he dashes off an oil painting of a local wilderness setting (snowy mountains, twilight vistas, trees), explaining all the while, in the unruffled monotone of a stoned hypnotist, how you too can get to a "special place" just by painting what's in your heart.

Carl himself seems nearly as much of an art object as his canvases of Mount Mansfield, the Vermont peak he has begun to paint with OCD frequency. He wears the same denim Western shirts, fuzzy beard and ash-blond Afro that he's been sporting since 1979. He's a relic: the landscape painter as Fred Rogers for adults, a kind of soft-rock guru from the age when men were Mellow. The biggest TV celebrity in Burlington, he thinks he's on top of the world, but he's about to come tumbling down.

Any resemblance between Carl Nargle and Bob Ross, the real-life PBS host of "The Joy of Painting" (Ross died in 1995, after 11 years of his famously staid broadcasts), is, of course, anything but coincidental. Yet "Paint," as closely as it hews to the pop-culture image of Ross as a becalmed kitsch Buddha of yes-you-*should*-try-this-at-home landscapes, isn't a thinly disguised Bob Ross biopic. The movie, written and directed by Brit McAdams (it's his first feature), takes off from Ross' image but uses it as the springboard for a dryly fanciful satire of male folly and duplicity. It's like a Will Ferrell comedy told in slow motion — think "Anchorman" minus the surrealism, with a more deadpan sense of the absurd.

Carl thinks of the world as a perfect place, but that's because he comes from a place of megalomaniacal privilege. Beneath his ridiculous '70s sensitive-guy facade, he's a smooth operator who treats the PBS staff like vassals, notably Katherine (Michaela Watkins), the station manager he loved and abandoned. He sleeps with every woman he can, taking them to the local fondue restaurant and getting them into the sofa bed in the back of his hippie van. He's so arrogantly tech-resistant he doesn't know what an Uber is and refuses to heed the "answering machine" inside a cellphone (he points out that people used to take the messages *for* you!). And he spends his spare time brooding over the fact that he has never had a painting placed in the Burlington Museum of Art. (He doesn't seem to realize that he's a celebrity because he turns art into a glorified version of paint-by-numbers.)

For all that, Carl's ratings are sinking, and when Ambrosia (Ciara Renée), a next-generation painter, is given a PBS show to air right after his, it's a sign that Carl's era has passed, which everyone seems to know except him. In its dry, deliberate way, "Paint" skewers something all too real: a certain kind of toxic self-deluding male myopia. For a while, it serves up a droll tweak of that very thing, though the film is also a bit labored. A feature-length comedy sketch played straight doesn't have much mystery to reveal, and those who will be drawn to seeing "Paint" might have welcomed a less acidic, more sincere Bob Ross riff, the kind you might have expected to see from the screenwriters of "Ed Wood" and "Big Eyes."

The movie tracks Carl's descent, his crackup, and his slow waking up to reality. Owen Wilson, elevating his familiar purr into a delectable murmur, plays all this in a kind of pitch-perfect daze, though it's not exactly a varied performance. (Ferrell would have made room for more of Carl's inner rage.) The movie strikes its principal note too many times, though if you're a Bob Ross person it can be a savory note. By the end, "Paint" has definitively skewered Carl's "special place." Yet the film should have spent a little more time actually believing it was special.

CREDITS: An IFC Films release of a Silver Lining Entertainment, Blue Creek Pictures, Balcony 9 Prods., White Birch Films production. **Producers:** Sam Maydew, Peter Brant. **Executive producers:** Richard J. Brosner, Joel David Moore, Amy Jarvela, Owen Wilson. **Director, writer:** Brit McAdams. **Camera:** Patrick Cady. **Editor:** Sofi Marshall. **Music:** Lyle Workman. MPA Rating: PG-13. **Running time:** 96 MIN. **Cast:** Owen Wilson, Michaela Watkins, Ciara Renée, Stephen Root, Wendi McLendon-Covey, Lucy Freyer, Lusia Strus, Michael Pemberton

IFC Films

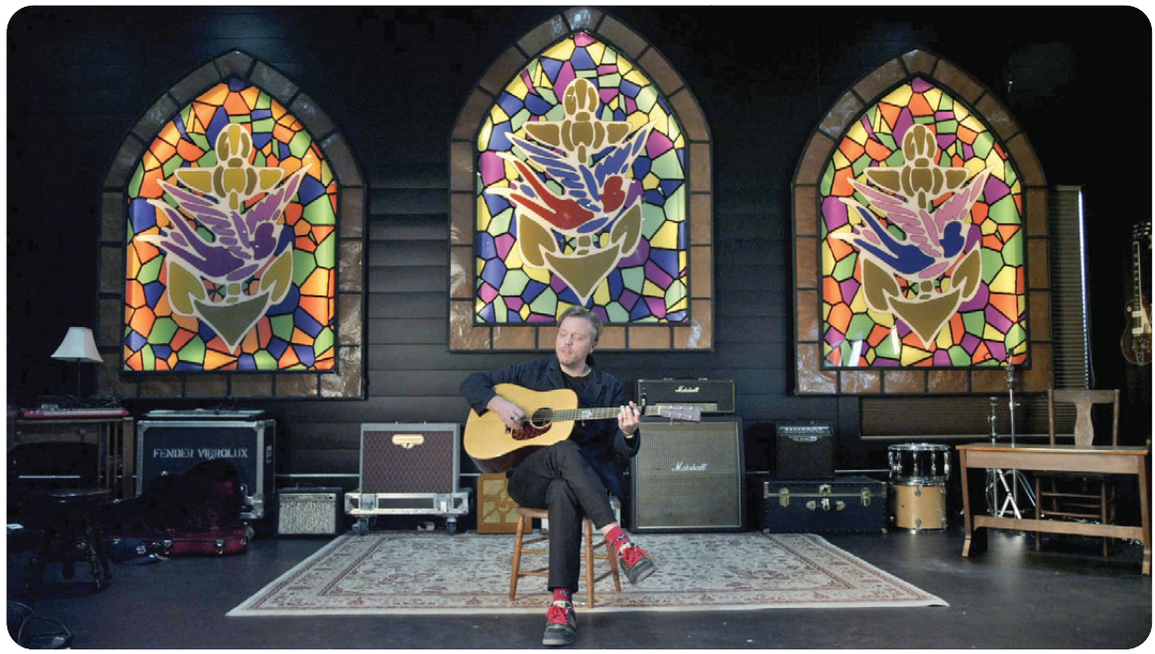
Jason Isbell: Running With Our Eyes Closed

By Chris Willman

TV REVIEW

Documentary: HBO Max; April 7

With: Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires



Jason Isbell in "Running With Our Eyes Closed"

HBO

In 2002, director Sam Jones made what is widely considered a benchmark for 21st-century music documentaries with "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart: A Film About Wilco," a movie that lucked into just about all the subject matter that could turn B-roll footage of the making of an album into A-list material. It had conflict within the band; conflict with the soon-to-be-ex-record label; and a musical auteur doing his own demon-wrestling, outside foils notwithstanding.

Now, it's easier to see that wasn't all luck, as more than 20 years later, Jones has come up with another gold-standard music doc in the form of the HBO Max's "Jason Isbell: Running With Our Eyes Closed." There are no record-company bookkeepers as unseen baddies in the backdrop to the making of Isbell's 2020 album "Reunions" — major labels are so 20th century, right? — but one common thread is intra-band tension. In this instance, unlike the by-now-iconic Wilco beefing between Jay Tweedy and Jay Bennett, the difficult vibes are between bandmates who double as a married couple, Isbell and his fiddler-spouse, Amanda Shires. Here, at least, we know no one's going anywhere, right? Or are they? Some mumbled references to one or the other checking into the local Omni instead of heading home from the studio suddenly make it clear that anything might be possible, even a split between the much-celebrated king and queen of Americana-leaning rock.

The ending is never really in doubt, which maybe is why it's more enjoyable than it ought to be to see the marrieds at the movie's center squabble, knowing there's going to be something instructive about it, given their mutual fierce emotional intelligence and empathy. There's a scene partway through the 2019 studio footage that flashes ahead to some shared time on stage at a 2020 Walt Disney Concert Hall gig, where Shires throws Isbell a mid-verse wink that goes unseen by everyone but the camera, and there might not be a more heartwarming moment in the movies this year.

Yet surrounding that, Jones eavesdrops on some of the deaths-by-papercuts that can make a marriage go wrong, which just happen to express themselves in an artistic context. Shires takes it as an insult that he says her violin is too loud; Isbell's not happy at the way that his wife, someone with a master's in creative writing, wants to grammatically correct the lyrics to the doc's title song, which he already slaved over. These scenes speak as much to marital strife as musical differences, but also to the editor-writer relationship: It's sad but, honestly, just a little hilarious to see a couple fraying around the edges over deeply held positions about the past or present participle in a song. (Isbell quips that his audience is "not out there dancing, so I've got to get my prepositions right.")

Jones' film is not just "Scenes From a Marriage" with a literally harmonious ending, although that relationship stuff is certainly some of the movie's most compelling, since Shires is as much of a natural movie star as Isbell is. (He's making his dramatic debut later in the year, in Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon.") The recording of the youthfully autobiographical song "Dreamsicle" leads in to a recounting of his experience as an Alabama teen developing master electric guitar chops to drown out the fighting of his soon-to-divorce parents. The years in which he blossomed into a baby-faced alcoholic as a member of Drive-By Truckers are well covered, via scary vintage footage, as is his late-blooming recovery. The third act focuses on how he and Shires promote his "Reunions" album during the pandemic — and how they re-bond over quarantine frustrations, unlike couples whose problems were exacerbated by being mutual shut-ins. The doc could almost have a different, Wilco-esque subtitle: "We Are Trying to Mend Our Hearts." You might actually feel it doing a small reparation job on yours.

CREDITS: Executive producers: Bill Simmons, Mark Duplass, Mel Eslyn, Jay Duplass, Jody Gerson, Marc Cimino. 98 MIN. **With:** Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires, Patterson Hood, Dave Cobb, Sadler Vaden

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Sabrina Carpenter

"I love when people don't believe in me because then it makes me work harder."

By Julia MacCary

Former Disney Channel star Sabrina Carpenter finds herself at a pivotal junction in her career. With a string of acting credits including "Girl Meets World," "The Hate U Give," "Tall Girl" and its sequel, and "Clouds," the pop star is now finding her voice as an adult. She bared her heart like never before on her 2022 album, "Emails I Can't Send," and hit song "Nonsense" — her first with Island Records. And this year, she's back on tour supporting "Emails I Can't Send Fwd," a reissue with four new songs.

● Do you find it harder to be taken seriously as a musician coming from Disney Channel? Yeah, I still find it hard sometimes. People see you growing up and becoming a young woman as you are trying to get away from that. But I did technically choose that path. I don't think as a 12-year-old, when I started, I knew that it would make some things harder later on. It also gave me a lot of opportunities, so I can't really be upset. It's just one of those things where you go, "Oh, there's positives that come from it, and there's things I'll have to work a little harder to get over." I love a challenge. I love when people don't believe in me because then it makes me work harder.

● Were you nervous to share your story so publicly on "Emails I Can't Send"? I knew that I should, because I was so scared. I was like, "Oh, that probably means I'm gonna grow from this, which is good." It also helped me as a person. Everyone's always, "Be fearless, live your life, take risks and go for things that scare you." But you never really understand it until that opportunity is in front of you. You do it and then you see where it can lead you.

● Did you feel forced to open up on the album before you were ready? I took my time with it; my fans were so pissed at me. I definitely made sure I felt like, "OK, this is time to be honest." Also, the pandemic was a big eye-opener for me, because I realized that life was just so uncertain. It made me want to make bolder choices, maybe not hesitate so much.

● How does the music you're making now compare with "Emails I Can't Send"? I don't know if I'm taking the exact same approach. But the one thing I'll hold with me forever is the brutal honesty. And making sure that I'm being very upfront with myself and not trying to write for other people. I've been experimenting quite a bit. I'm so excited because the last album opened the door for a lot of possibilities. And I listen to completely different music now than I did when I first started making that album, so I think that will lead me to really interesting places.

● You wrote "Pushing 20" at age 19. What advice would you give yourself then? Don't fall in love. Don't date anyone. [Laughs] No, no, no. Nineteen was an awesome year. I was like, "Oh, I'm so young. I'm not in my 20s, but I'm not too young that people don't take me seriously." So I would tell myself to stay in that headspace of you are young, and you have space to fail, and you have space to succeed. So just enjoy it. And find people that make you laugh. Laughter is the best. Such a cliché, "Laughter is the best medicine," but I truly believe that.

Things you didn't know about Sabrina Carpenter

→

Age: 23

Hometown: Lower Milford Township, Pa.

Role model: Christina Aguilera, who, like Carpenter, spent time on the Disney Channel

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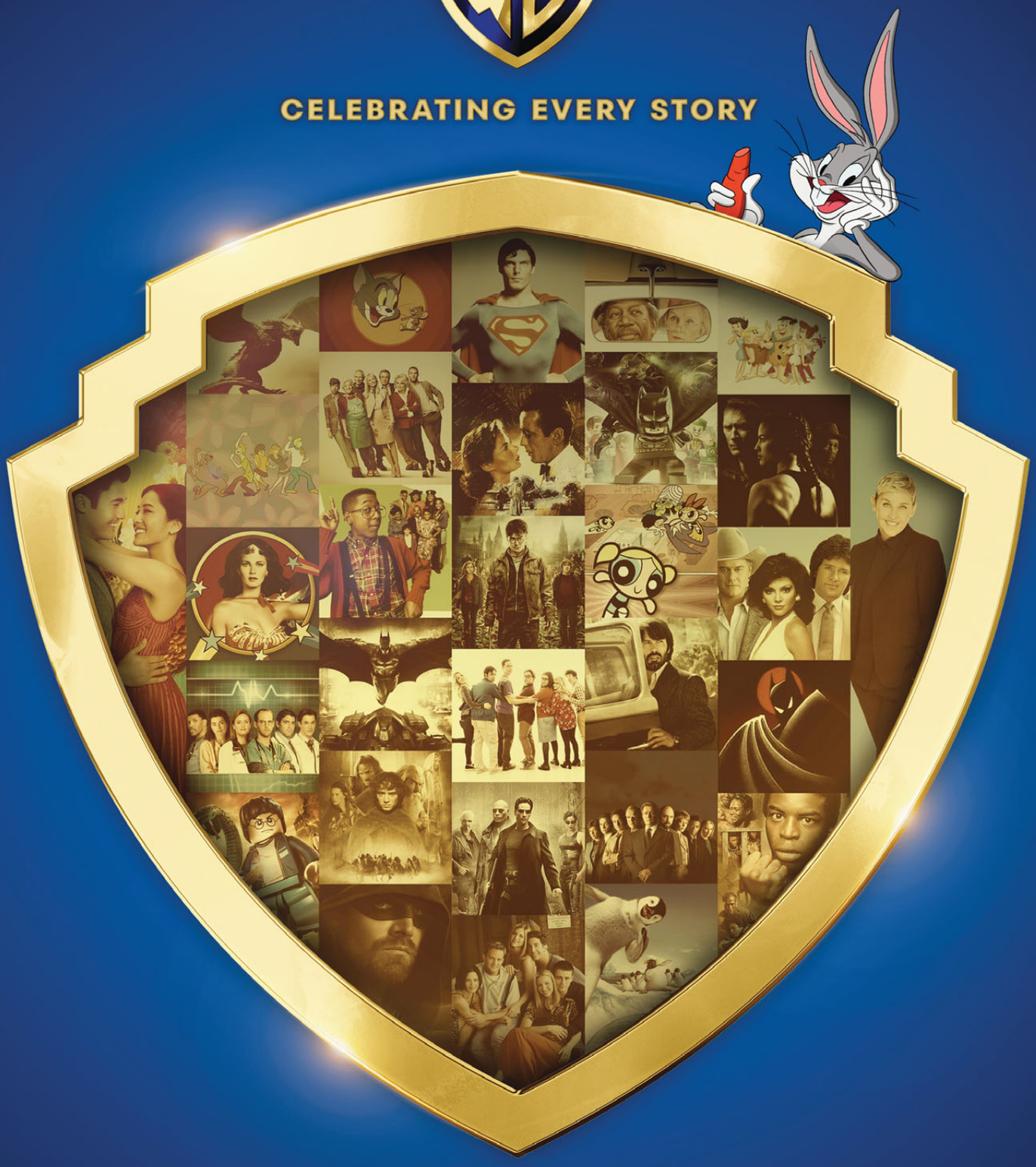

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